

George Campbell.

Easter.

Walshead. 1932.

with Tom & Aunt Betty

THE SEASONS IN WOOD AND VALLEY

BY

E. M. WILLIAMS



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To
ANTHONY TREVOR WILLIAMS

Summae pietatis nepoti, socio concordissimo

CONTENTS

							PAGE
JANUARY	..	..	..	..	..	..	1
FEBRUARY	..	..	..	..	..	..	21
MARCH	..	..	..	..	..	..	41
APRIL	..	..	..	..	..	..	63
MAY	..	..	..	..	..	..	87
JUNE	..	..	..	..	..	..	109
JULY	..	..	..	..	..	..	129
AUGUST	..	..	..	..	..	..	151
SEPTEMBER	..	..	..	..	..	..	169
OCTOBER	..	..	..	..	..	..	189
NOVEMBER	..	..	..	..	..	..	209
DECEMBER	..	..	..	..	..	..	229

JANUARY

JANUARY

I

THE old year died, and the new year was born, under a clear, moonless sky, brilliantly lit with stars. On the high, open Common—where no faintest sound of bells was heard to tell the exact moment of the passing of the year—the air was extraordinarily still; neither sea-breeze nor land-breeze rustled the sleeping bushes, and only one slight sough of wind blew up over the heath and faded away to the north, at midnight. This sough of wind, the last breath of the dying year—or the sob of Time when she is delivered of her child—is always heard by the believing souls who watch for it; in the still night I really felt it come and go and it was no mere ghostly sigh conjured up by the imagination. Some minutes before twelve o'clock, and again some minutes later, sheet lightning played about the south-eastern horizon. So mild was the weather that even on that exposed spot—only two miles from the coast and not one sheltering wood or ridge of hill between—there was no sting of cold in the air, though a certain chilliness rose from the saturated turf, which wa

4 *THE SEASONS IN WOOD AND VALLEY*

compressed by every footfall and oozed water like a squeezed sponge. The solitary brown owl in the Copse, who on other evenings had hooted loud, was silent, and silent too were the waterfowl on the marsh ; not a bird of any kind uttered a note, and the sharp cry that too often tells of a woodland tragedy, did not once vex the darkness. But after the new year was born, a sound of large wings, beating regularly, passed by overhead and could be heard travelling far away into the distance. In the glamour of the darkness and the silence, the sound seemed to be different from any throbbing of bird-wings ever heard by day.

II

Here in Hampshire we possess some of the noblest holly-trees to be found in England ; the old hollies—whether growing in groups, or singly, or in long, tunnel-like avenues under the shadow of the great-limbed oaks—are among the chiefest glories of the New Forest. But year by year portions of this glory are shorn away, and no vigour of new growth can keep pace with the relentless cutting. All foresters, great and small alike, are very jealous of any encroachment on their valuable grazing-grounds, and are naturally unwilling to lose one inch of feed ; even as things are now, they say, “ there is not meat enough on the Forest,” for the large number of ponies and cows turned out on it, and were the hollies allowed to occupy as much ground as they could acquire

by continued seed-dropping and unchecked growth, the green rides through the enclosures would in time be blocked, and holly groves would gradually absorb large tracts of the open commons. Therefore, each season, as Christmas approaches, a certain proportion of the holly-trees are sacrificed, and the produce sent to the London markets ; the Forest revenues benefit by the sale of the berries, and the rides and wide lawns where the cattle and ponies feed, are kept clear. But the destruction wrought is deplorable ; the most beautiful instead of the least beautiful hollies are often carelessly selected for execution, and the axe of the spoiler does not spare even venerable patriarchs, which have stood as sentinels in open spaces—where they have obstructed nothing and robbed no-one—for generations. A year or two ago there was to be seen on the open Common, hard by the entrance to the Copse, a magnificent group of hollies with straight, silvery boles and well-developed limbs. Although growing close to the principal entrance to the wood, the trees stood well to one side of the worn track across the turf, and they did not in any way impede the passage of waggons, horsemen, or herds of cattle. They are now mere headless trunks, mutilated and undignified. What has been done in this one place, has, unfortunately, been done in many places ; the whole aspect of the woods is marred each year, when Christmas has come and gone, by the desolate appearance of the hundreds of skeleton hollies lying prostrate on the ground. Turn the average woodman loose and bid him “ cut,” and he does not know when and where to stop. Holly-berries

are eminently saleable merchandise, and holly-wood makes excellent and lasting fuel ; it is an easy matter to chop through the stem of a bush two or three feet above the root, to cut off the berried limbs, and to let the trunk rest where it falls until such time as it is convenient to carry home the wood for firing.

Bird-lovers, too, may feel this yearly devastation as keenly as those who object to it solely because they would have the New Forest to be kept as a forest in its native, wild aspect, and not as a park or artificial plantation. The dense holly-bush is the favourite nesting-place of many species—the safest they know. Moreover, in winter, when the earth is bound in a hard and prolonged frost, the berries, “ blushing in their natural coral,” amidst the glossy deep-green foliage, attract birds—especially the thrush family—from far and near, who, although they do not much care for such food at other times, when the moist earth yields them worms, are ready enough to devour it when there is nothing else to save them from perishing of hunger.

III

Bob—a cross between an Airedale and a smooth-coated sheep-dog—is an inveterate hunter ; he kills young rabbits, moorhens, old and young, and rats and mice ; and he does his best to kill hares and pheasants—but hares and pheasants are too quick of limb and wing to be caught by him. The forest-keepers know him

well, and keep a watchful eye on his doings ; and have often threatened him with swift and sudden death. Still he lives on, and will probably continue to live for many years ; for, with all his wickedness, he has stern rules of his own making by which he guides his conduct, and his owners, knowing this—and knowing that they can absolutely rely on his not breaking his rules—are able to limit his powers of mischief. The cottage where the dog has his home, stands at the edge of a great wood and away in front stretches a wide heath covered with furze-brakes, patches of briar and bramble, and old thorns ; the common is full of rabbits and the wood is full of birds, and yet Bob will never attempt to hunt, either in the open or in the coverts, alone. He can be trusted to sit all day on the turf outside his front door, keeping guard over his house, and over the hens and chickens who are under his protection, and never once to make the smallest expedition to investigate the origin of any of the delightful scents which he must inhale when he lies with nose in air, sniff-sniffing. But let any member of his household, or any visitor whom he has adopted, slip out at the back, without making a sound, and enter the woods—he knows in a moment, and is off round the pig-styes to meet them, bounding and leaping, and congratulating himself that he has done a very clever thing. However, his joy is short-lived when his master is anywhere about ; one shouted command, and he returns crestfallen, to spend the afternoon imprisoned in the cow-shed. A dog-lover can but feel it a sad preliminary to a walk to be obliged to say.

8 THE SEASONS IN WOOD AND VALLEY

“ Please keep Bob shut up for an hour or two ” ; yet this precaution is always necessary if any peace of mind is to be enjoyed ; for should the dog be let out even half-an-hour after the walker has started, he will follow the scent right through the Copse, and make the place ring with his barks when he finds his hoped-for companion, perhaps a mile away. Until he so finds him, no hunting is done ; straight up one ride and down another, goes Bob—now with his nose to the ground “ questing,” and now bounding along sure of his direction. But the moment his friend has been met and greeted, he is off again in a different fashion, “ That’s all right,” he says, “ now I’ve got someone with me I can begin to enjoy myself.” He flies over ditch and bank as though possessed of wings, he dashes across the shallow stream, he pushes through thorny brakes which would tear a human skin or coat to rags, and emerges scratchless, and whenever he sights fur or feather, he gives tongue like a pack of hounds in full cry. His unwilling associate walks soberly and despondently along the paths, scarcely seeing the dog once in five minutes, wondering why human companionship should rouse in him this passionate fervour for the chase, and mourning over a spoilt afternoon. Round the corner comes the keeper ; he touches his hat and says : “ Would you kindly not bring that dog into the Copse. I think I have mentioned it before ! ”

Romanes said somewhere—I think it was in the introduction to *Animal Intelligence*—that with all their cleverness, their developed consciences, and their cultivated sense of right and wrong, dogs have never been

known to acquire any vestige of religious principle, or to institute any form of religious observance. If I remember rightly, he remarked that were religion—scientifically speaking—gradually evolved from within, we ought to be able to trace the first beginnings of it in dogs, who have become, through long association with the human race, the most human-minded of all animals. This passage has always remained in my memory, because, unlike the writer, I have been able to trace, or to fancy that I traced, in a dog, what appeared to be the dawn of a superstitious kind of religion—or rather, of a system of fetich-worship. Many years ago there lived in my home a little yellow dog, with a strongly marked character. He had a quick temper and decided likes and dislikes, and an adoration for his owner that was almost painful. Playing with stones was his favourite amusement, and in course of time it came about that he insisted on having a small, round stone always at hand, indoors as well as out of doors. He would carry it in his mouth and put it down in a carefully selected position, and then with his two fore-paws would shoot it under a piano that was set end-wise to a wall, and would promptly rush round and pick it up on the other side. He would also shoot the stone under book-shelves and tables and chests-of-drawers, and play with it as a cat plays with a mouse, and after purposely sending it over the top of a staircase, pursue it as it sprang from step to step, and pounce upon it in the hall below. At first the dog was master, and the stone was his toy and plaything ; but gradually the stone got the ascendancy over the little

dog, and he grew to be its slave—he was obliged to play with it, whether he wanted to or not, and it was at times evident that he wearied of the bondage. The dog would come in from a walk tired and hungry, and his dinner would be placed before him ; he would smell it eagerly, and then look hurriedly round for his stone and run all over the house until he found it. When he had got it, he put it down beside his plate and played with it for a minute or two—patting it about and knocking it backwards and forwards—before he began to eat. Sometimes, if he was unusually hungry, he gave it only one impatient push and flew to his dinner—but the stone would not allow him to enjoy it ; it again claimed his attention and exercised its magnetic attraction and he had to perform more rites before he was permitted to go on with his meal.

IV

No matter how long and how closely an observer watches birds and studies their ways, he is always discovering something new about them, and known details of their behaviour and habits always remain unexplained and serve to keep alive his interest in everything connected with bird-life. Why, for instance, does a bird put its leg behind, or rather *through*, its wing to scratch its head, instead of lifting a foot straight up in front of its shoulder ? A parrot scratches its head in a sensible and natural manner ; it raises its claw to its

poll for a satisfactory scratch, as easily and simply as it raises it to its beak to convey food. But not one of the small, native birds that we see about our gardens has learnt either to carry its food to its bill with its claw, or to lift its foot straight to its head. A sudden irritation makes a linnet, let us say, desire to scratch the top of its head; its wing is immediately extended and drooped, and up through the flight-feathers is thrust the hand-like foot. Apparently, the bird knows that, for some reason which is hidden from us, the proverb which states that "the longest way round is the shortest way there," is applicable to the business of poll-scratching; for the shortest way for the foot to travel from ground to head would certainly not seem to be round behind the wing. Having touched the spot where the teasing irritation is felt, the linnet agitates its claw with vigour and with inconceivable rapidity.

The power possessed alike by bird and beast and insect, of moving the limbs and joints more quickly than the eye of man can follow their motion, is a very curious thing. We know that a hovering humming-bird vibrates its wings so rapidly that the tiny creature looks to the spectator like a wingless bird suspended motionless in the centre of a quivering, grey mist; and in the movements of that most fascinating and delightful of insects, the common humming-bird hawk-moth, we see displayed in a lesser degree, the same action. We see it also in the wing-exercises of the many different kinds of hover-flies, and in the impotent buzzing of unfortunate blue bottles caught in spiders' webs. But extreme rapidity of motion

strikes us as more remarkable when it is exhibited by beasts and birds, who occupy a place immeasurably nearer to ourselves in the great family of sentient beings, than when it is merely the expression of an insect's energy and vitality. A hovering kestrel, preparing to drop upon its prey, and a hovering kingfisher hung like a glittering jewel above the clear stream, where it can see the little fishes moving in the water, beat the air so quickly with their extended wings that one stroke cannot be separated from another by the eye of the watcher. These hoverers' pinions vibrate with the regularity and precision of a mechanical contrivance. A man's stiff joints and muscles can accomplish nothing that may be compared with this easy and instinctive motion. It is only after infinite labour and much painful practice that a pianist learns to move his hands "like lightning," as we say; but a young swift hurls itself through the air at a pace scarcely inferior to that of its parents' flight; and, to descend to humbler matters, even a baby rabbit munches the tender grass with jaws that meet and part with incredible speed.

V

The presence of a flock of sheep in a field is a God-send to birds in cold weather. One day, when the ground was rocky with frost, I took note of the birds that were companioning a small flock of butcher's sheep in a low-lying meadow near the river. Thirteen different

species were represented—including birds as unlike each other as gulls and redwings, robins and moorhens. The constant movement of the sheep's feet, the nibbling of their teeth, and the warm breath blown from their nostrils, stir up any animal life that may lurk in the turf on which they are grazing, and their droppings tend to soften the hard earth and to attract small beetles, and other insects, to the surface. The jackdaws that follow a flock are not content with feeding on the ground; they make a practice of perching on the sheeps' bodies and searching for vermin in their woolly fleeces. If a sheep is lying down, a jackdaw usually alights on the grass near it, hops—or sometimes climbs—on to its back above the tail, and then walks towards its head; the beast's neck is the favourite hunting-place, for when it is bent, the thick fleece parts on the poll, and a sharp beak may readily be inserted in the clefts in the wool. From the neck the bird steps up on to the head, and—standing erect between the ears—looks all round to see that there are no dangers about; then he tips over and examines the corners of the sheep's eyes, picking here and pecking there. It is obvious to an onlooker that the sheep derives much pleasure and satisfaction from the daw's ministrations, which ease its irritable skin and rid it of some of its tormentors. While its friend is at work it holds itself stiff and still, and takes the utmost care not to drive the bird away by any sudden movement. After a satisfactory meal, Jack generally gives his bill a thorough cleaning on his host's woolly back before he flies off.

VI

It is interesting to watch the mingled fear and boldness exhibited by sheep when confronted with a small dog. A few days ago I walked with a little dog through a field where twenty or thirty sheep were grazing. No sooner did they catch sight of my companion, than they all left off feeding and stood at gaze; then the bravest of the band advanced step by step until he was within half-a-dozen yards of the dog, and behind him came his brethren huddled close together in a compact battalion. Though obviously nervous, the little dog refused to be stared out of countenance; he held his ground, and uttered a succession of sharp barks, and finally ran at the sheep, who scattered and fled. But directly their pursuer's back was turned, the beasts drew together again and marched after him, and succeeded in attracting his attention; then followed a repetition of the former scene—a pause, dog and sheep gazing at each other, a swift rush, and a wild retreat. After the second stampede, the dog decided that such creatures were not worthy of his notice, and though they followed close at his heels to the farther gate of the field, and thrust their noses against the bars when he had passed through—he ignored their existence and went on his way with such dignity as he was able to command. Why are sheep drawn towards dogs, as though by a magnet? It would surely be their best policy to avoid, rather than to court, observation; for even a comparatively small dog can do much

mischievous in a flock if once the evil spirit which incites to sheep-worrying enters into him. Possibly in a monotonous life, wholly made up of eating and resting, resting and eating, an excitement tinged with fear is better than no excitement at all. One has observed this same alert curiosity in other animals living in luxurious idleness, deprived of that heritage of work and struggle for existence, which gives a zest to life. I remember, years ago, taking a short cut across a pasture where nearly a score of young bullocks were turned out with nothing to do but to fatten themselves for the butcher. Following me, were two dogs, who were objects of the liveliest interest to these bullocks, and the whole herd escorted us from one side of the field to the other, and ranged up in a row with heads over the rails, as soon as we had gone through the fence which shut off a rough country lane. The beasts' attentions were purely friendly, and it was evident that they were sorry to say good-bye.

VII

No ordinarily-observant person can have failed to notice on stripped fir-poles, and occasionally on old beech or sycamore stumps from which the bark has fallen, strange brown markings graved in the wood and looking not unlike the "poker-work" which was at one time executed with delight by people who had nothing better to do. Such markings are often deeply

cut, and sometimes they remain on roughly-trimmed logs or poles for years after the timber has been in use. I can recall at this moment an old-fashioned stile, some miles out of Winchester, of which the top bar is merely a length of pine-log untouched by plane or chisel. On this log is traced an intricate series of patterns bearing a close resemblance to fossil corallines or *Encrinites*. These patterns are the signatures of wood-devouring beetles, and the correct reading of them is probably "*Hylastes ater*, his mark." Different species of wood-beetles possess different habits; in some species the larvæ and the perfect insects both live under the bark and both eat into the substance of the wood; in others the larvæ live in the young shoots of fir-trees, causing them to perish and drop off. Where the pattern found on the naked bole is like the midrib of a leaf with veins branching off on either side, the mother-beetle has eaten out the main groove and deposited her eggs at intervals along it; and each larva has, on hatching from the egg, started on a voyage of discovery, devouring all the woody fibres in its path so as to form for itself a passage. It is easy to understand that when hundreds of beetles and their grubs are at work in a tree—mining between bark and trunk—the bark gradually becomes loosened and portions of it break away. A tree in full health and vigour is said to be able to resist the attacks of these mischievous insects—when the sap is running freely it chokes the bores as quickly as they are drilled, and the miners perish or are driven out. Woodpeckers know perfectly well, either from the appearance of the

back or from the sound of their beaks upon it, where the wood-devourers are destructively active; and at all times they do their utmost to keep under the pests

VIII

One of the prettiest sights I have seen this winter was the descent of a flock of linnets on to a pool on the canal just above an old disused lock. There was scarcely any water in the bed of the stream, and what water there was, was bordered with ice. But at the margin of this pool, and across its shallow end, small weed-stained boulders and banks of large pebbles formed convenient landing-places for thirsty birds. I had been watching blackbirds, wagtails, and chaffinches drinking, when suddenly there came a sound of musical twittering, and a party of linnets flitted by and alighted on a tree. From the tree they dropped one by one to the little islands and promontories round which a swift, twinkling stream of inch-deep water trickled. Busy dippings, splashings, and flutterings were accompanied by an unceasing murmur of those pure, sweet notes which only linnets can produce. When the washing was over the birds returned to the trees, where they preened and dried themselves and fluffed out their feathers in the sun. All this dabbling in the water was enjoyed on a day when the ice that crackled along the edge of the canal remained dry and white from dawn to dark.

It is doubtless starvation, and not such cold as we

experience in England, that kills most of the birds whose frozen bodies are carried off in the town by prowling cats, and in the fields and coverts by hungry foxes. Wild birds can keep the flame of life alight by incessant exercise as long as they are able to find fuel to feed that flame. Even the rooks which Gilbert White saw with their wing-feathers bound together with ice, tried to fly—they fell victims to the cruelty of man, not to the cruelty of the elements.

The case is very different with birds in cages. No words are too strong to be used in condemnation of the practice of hanging up caged birds on outside walls in bitter weather. To leave a bird in a cutting draught between an open door and an open window is scarcely less iniquitous. A closely-barred prisoner cannot shift its quarters with the shifting wind and shifting sunlight, cannot stretch its wings in flight to circulate its blood, and cannot, alas, possess the perfect health and abundant vitality that enables a bird living a natural life amid natural surroundings to endure extremes of heat and cold.

IX

The St. Agnes Eve which has just passed was not the St. Agnes Eve of Keats :

“ Ah, bitter chill it was !

The owl, for all his feathers, was a-cold ;

The hare limp'd trembling through the frozen grass,

And silent was the flock in woolly fold ; ”

Nor the St. Agnes Eve of which Tennyson drew a picture :

“ Deep on the convent roofs the snows
Are sparkling to the moon : ”

A windless day of brilliant sunshine, the Eve of St. Agnes was this year a prophecy and foretaste of the spring. I spent almost all the daylight hours cycling and loitering in the country. Pushing up-hill over roads made heavy by frost and thaw, the heat was sometimes too great to be wholly pleasant. Of all that I saw and heard under the sunny skies, these were the sights and sounds which I dwelt upon with most pleasure, and which came back to me most clearly by the evening fire: An azure kingfisher speeding across the rippling, blue water in a flooded meadow: the clamour of a yaffle laughing loud among lichen-covered oak trees: “ woolly folds ” noisy with bass and treble bleatings: the glitter of burnished green on the heads of amorous mallards: a coal-tit wooing his mate with quivering wings and a continuous croon like the whirr of a fisherman’s reel: moist ridges of brown, wholesome earth turning under the ploughshare: and loquacious rooks examining old colonies of nests.

FEBRUARY

FEBRUARY

I

IN all the seasons of the circling year is there a month more delightful than February? The rain may come down in torrents, the mud may be ankle-deep in every lane and cart-track—churned to a sea of brown ooze at the gates and gaps in the hedges which cattle pass through—the mornings may be grey and the young moon may swim at night in a bath of vapour, but each day brings some fresh sign of the awakening of the world to another beautiful springtide, and we can say to ourselves: “In six weeks the chiff-chaff will be here, in seven weeks the sand-martins, and before two months are over the cuckoo will be calling in the primrose copses and the willow-wrens singing in every bush.”

Young leaves and shoots may even now be found on the earliest shrubs and climbing plants. Among the first buds to break open, are the leaf buds of the honeysuckle. The tender foliage—soft and fine, with a delicate bloom on it—looks as though it had made a mistake in coming out so soon, but it will weather the winds

and frosts of March, and will scarcely show a curled brown edge, except where it is torn by some rough blast—or by some investigating beak. Bullfinches are extremely fond of pulling to pieces the honeysuckle buds in the hedgerows. A prettier sight than three or four rosy-breasted finches sitting up in a brown hawthorn-hedge, and plucking and throwing down the bright green leaves, is not often seen. In the winter and early spring bullfinches are apt to travel in small flocks, and it is not unusual to come upon six or eight birds together ; it is almost invariably an even number that is found feeding in company, for the sober hen and her more gaily coloured mate never care to wander far apart.

The elder expands its buds at least as early as the honeysuckle but the appearance of its first leaves is in marked contrast to the appearance of the first leaves of "the twisted woodbine." The elder-shoots are thick and stubby, and more purple than green, and their surface is hard and shining ; after coming out in a great hurry, they pause for many weeks before they uncurl their tight, stiff folds and take on a livelier hue. While the leaves are still in their first stage of development, Jew's ear fungi, *Hirneola auricula-Judae*, may be looked for on the coarse bark of the elders. Strangely ear-like in their shape, and rather unpleasantly flesh-like in their soft substance and livid, purplish colour, it is not to be wondered at that they should, both in common speech and in scientific language, be called "ears," and possibly the name "Jew's ear" dates from the days when

Jews were held in supreme contempt, and an unclean growth hideously resembling a human ear, might well have seemed to be a fitting object on which to bestow a derisive title that would be an insult to the race. Prior, tells us that tradition derives the name from a legend that the tree on which Judas hanged himself was an elder. This fungus had at one time a great reputation as a cure for sore throats, but the days of herbalists and their remedies are past and gone ; the peasantry of the present generation prefer to dose themselves with patent medicines purchased in chymists' shops—medicines which, whatever their potency for good may be, are far more potent for evil than the old "yarbs" and simples of the village herb-gatherer.

II

A woman who was hawking boot-laces, and such like things, told me this story a short time ago : " We lived up the country near Basingstoke one time of day, and my husband worked on a farm. He used to pick up a few shillings beating the bushes and driving the birds when the shooting-parties were on ; and a gentleman that came down to those parts shot an owl once which flew out of the trees. He give it to my husband to carry away because nobody wanted an owl to put along with the pheasants. My husband he brought it home and said I could have it if I'd any use for it. There was a wonderful sight of feathers on that bird ; you

wouldn't scarcely believe how many there was. When I'd plucked them all off there wasn't much left, and what there was anyone wouldn't have fancied to have eat. It seemed a shame to throw all them feathers away, so I dried them in the oven and kept them ; and then I took a notion to stuff a cushion with them. I'd got a bit of red twill by me and I sewed it up and put the feathers in. It was as soft as anything and as big as a small pillow might be, so I thought I'd have it in my bed. I was very sleepy the first night and as soon as I laid down I began to drop off. But, before I was fairly gone, something seemed to rise up under my head and turn round. It happened just like that over and over again. I couldn't get to sleep or keep quiet anyhow ; every time I was nearly off, something inside the pillow turned over and heaved up and I gave a jump. My husband woke up and asked me what I was about. So I told him it was his old owl's feathers, and he said, ' If that's all, chuck it out of the window.' And so I did, and went to sleep. And my neighbour said next morning she'd had quite a turn seeing something red under the window, and not knowing if somebody mightn't have fallen out in the night. ' And such a pity, too,' she said, ' your new cushion all damp and draggled over on the ground.' So I told her how it was, and how I'd stuffed it with the owl's feathers. And she asked me how I ever came to do such a thing ; didn't I know that the baker's daughter in Bible times was turned into an owl because she wouldn't give the Master any bread when He was hungry, and nobody had ever

been able to sleep on owl's feathers since? I don't rightly remember what became of the cushion, or whether I washed out the bit of twill and used it again, but I've never sort of cared to meddle with owl's feathers any more."

So the old legend that was known to Ophelia, was known also to the Hampshire peasant. Or did the neighbour read Hamlet and there learn it? "They say the Owl was a Baker's Daughter, we know what we are, but know not what we may be."

III

Superstition is a very common infirmity of both the educated and the uneducated mind. This can hardly be denied. If people are not superstitious why do they so often hang up horse-shoes on some part of their premises? It is astonishing how many shoes are to be seen on stables and barns and front-doors, on chimney-pieces and lintels. The owners of the doors and stables may smile at the idea of anyone suggesting that they have the smallest belief in the luckiness of a horse-shoe and its power to ward off evil; they may say that in hanging up the piece of rusty iron they are only following an old custom which has no meaning for them. Nevertheless, they are quite unable to see a horse-shoe and leave it lying on the ground. Perhaps they pass by with the full intention of not picking it up; but—urged

by a feeling which they cannot resist—they turn back before they have gone many steps, and the treasure is secured and carried home. It would be a pity if it were not so, and if the rude ornaments which we have been used to seeing for so long were to be missing from hearth and door-post. I only complain that the superstitious folk are not superstitious enough; they take the trouble to collect horse-shoes, but they do not take the trouble to fasten them up on their houses in the right position. Nine-tenths of the shoes that I see are hung on a nail with the curved part turned upwards. Is it not a matter of common knowledge that when a horse-shoe is placed with the open end downwards all the luck drops out?

IV

Why do blackbirds, when they alight on the ground, fan out their tails and raise them in the air? Down from a shrub drops a blackbird, and as soon as his feet touch the grass his half-unfurled tail goes up. This lifting and spreading of the tail-feathers appears to be necessary to keep the bird's balance and to prevent the jerk of his sudden landing sending him forward on to his nose; but immediately behind him comes a thrush, and the thrush's tail is not flirited upwards in the same way. The gentle thrush, it is true, descends with less impetuous vigour than his burly cousin; and perhaps it is because

he is more dignified and restrained in all his movements that he has never been obliged to acquire the habit of tail-lifting. How useful a bird's tail is in helping it to maintain its balance, is well seen when a rook perches on a telegraph wire. The tail is incessantly opened and shut, and brought sharply forwards below the clutching feet, and as sharply bent back again, all the time that the great black fowl remains on his uncomfortably narrow resting-place.

The whole subject of the tail-movements of birds is extremely interesting. Bullfinches certainly, and possibly some other finches, hold their tails on one side—curved round towards their bodies—when they are unusually excited or when they find themselves among strange surroundings. Everyone who has kept a caged bullfinch must have noticed this. The tail-wagging of the wagtails would strike us as an exceedingly curious performance if we were not so well used to seeing it. And in the grey-wagtail it is carried to such a pitch that it does in fact seem extraordinary to anyone who, for the first time, observes this beautiful member of the *Motacilla* family—not merely the tail, but half of the body is moved rapidly up and down. The pipits, the wagtails' nearest relations, wag slowly and almost listlessly when they are standing on the ground or on a bush, the stonechat twitches and jerks his tail-feathers repeatedly, and the pretty wheatear also lifts and lowers his conspicuous black and white tail, while he sits erect on some boulder or cairn of flints or scrubby thorn.

V

In the side chapel of Tichborne Church there are two very old and very remarkable hassocks. I have seen nothing like them anywhere else, and they are so curious that they merit description. These kneeling-cushions—if cushions they can be called—are high thick clumps of matted grass-root dug from the meadows and roughly trimmed. They are flat and hard at the bottom, but the tops are still shaggy with the worn remains of tough blades of grass. Looked at from above, both hassocks appear to be more or less round; but the fringed edges disguise the shape, and when they are turned over the larger of the two is seen to be cut into the form of a heart. Turfy-hair-grass (*Deschampsia coespitosa*) is very common in the upper part of the Itchen Valley, and it is out of tussocks of this species of grass that the cushions have been made. It is worth noticing that “hassock” originally meant a support for the feet made of rushes and that the support was so called because the name of the plant employed in its manufacture was “hesg” or “hassoc.” Some authorities derive “hassoc” from the Anglo-Saxon word “hwaet,” acute—the edges of the hassoc leaves being exceedingly sharp. Everyone who has attempted to pick the leaves of the turfy-hair-grass has been made unpleasantly aware that they cut like a knife. Perhaps we have in the Tichborne kneeling-cushions, specimens of the first kind of hassock ever made; specimens, in fact, of the only sort of footstool which can with perfect accuracy be called a “hassock.”

VI

The springtime, although it rejoices our hearts, has not always a good effect on our bodies. It was not without reason that our grandfathers were, as a matter of course, "let blood" in the spring, for it is a season that is none too healthy even for the young, while to the aged it is positively dangerous. With the spring comes Lent, and in old days when the Church's fasts were much more strictly observed than they are now, the keeping of Lent meant restriction to a diet composed to a great extent of vegetables and herbs. When we consider how largely pot-herbs and simples figured in the *materia medica* employed by physicians and wise-women, from the earliest times down to a century or two ago, it may occur to us to wonder which actually came first in the history of the Western races—the herb and salad spring diet, or the observance of the Christian Lent. Years ago I used often to talk to a working woman who was without much book-learning, but who knew some things which the educated world does not know, and was a careful mother. Every spring she dosed her children with a variety of herbs prepared by herself, with the result that they, as she said, "ate bread as sweet as a nut all the summer through," and lived to do her credit. The old herbalists were fond of writing about the ill-humours of the blood and its need of purification, and they held that all that was required to keep in health was a timely and discriminating use of the

common green things that grow in every hedgerow or garden border.

That Lenten fare was much more universally adopted, and much more carefully provided for, two or three hundred years ago than it is now, is proved by the frequency with which allusions to it are found in old botanical and horticultural books; "Goose-grass with young Nettle-tops are us'd in Lenten pottages," or again, "the Tops and leaves (of lamb's lettuce) being a Sallet of themselves are seasonably eaten with other Sallets the whole winter long and early spring, they call them *Salad de Preter* for their being generally eaten in Lent."

The salads of the present day are sadly wanting in variety compared to the salads which—if we are to believe the books—were habitually prepared in our great-grandfathers' kitchens. "Anything green that came out of the mould," which was not actually poisonous, seems to have been used in one way or another. As many as eighty-two "Materials of Sallets" are given by Evelyn in his *Acetaria*, and he quotes Cowley's lines—

"Scarce any Plant is used here,
Which 'gainst some Ail a Weapon does not bear."

Beginning with Alexanders, of which "the gentle fresh Sprouts Buds and Tops are to be chosen," the writer ends with wood-sorrel, and to his eighty-two orthodox saladings he adds "sundry more, formerly had in *deliciis*,

since grown obsolete, or quite neglected with us." Among these obsolete "sallet-herbs" are included the bulbs of the tulip and of the yellow Italian Star-of-Bethlehem, "divers of the Satyrions," the Green-poppy, the daffodil, and "the mordicant *Arum Theophrasti*." "There are besides several remaining," Evelyn goes on to say, "which, tho' abdicated here with us, find Entertainment still in Foreign Countries: as the large Sunflower. . . . I once made Macaroons with the ripe blanch'd Seeds, but the Turpentine did so domineer over all that it did not answer expectation."

VII

Long generations of soft living have not eradicated the out-of-doors instinct in dogs. Fire-worshippers though they are, they will all forsake artificial heat for natural heat, the rays of the fire for the rays of the sun. I have kept dogs all my life and I had never known one to whom a patch of sunshine on the bare ground was not more attractive than a comfortable bed on the hearth-rug. A curious little incident happened in connection with this instinct one day. My old dog had formed the habit of going in the morning into a room with a south aspect, and sitting there by himself if he found the sun shining on the floor. One day he made his way to this room earlier than usual, before the sunbeams had travelled from the eastern wall to the ground. Looking round he saw the warm light that he loved

resting on the top of a trunk, while the carpet was all dull and cheerless. Standing on his hind legs he scratched with his fore paws at the sunshine, fully expecting that it would slip off the trunk on to the floor below. It was some time before he discovered that the coveted brightness was not a tangible thing that he could move by his efforts. He argued that he was always able to pull down any coats or rugs inadvertently left on chairs, and in their owner's absence make a comfortable couch of them by dint of much scratching and turning round and round ; therefore, he had every reason to suppose that he could with equal ease pull down this superior kind of heat-giving material and stretch himself upon it.

This same dog was once the hero of a brief episode, which for him was doubtless a tragedy, but which to the onlooker was pure comedy. Late one hot summer night he was upstairs in a dimly lighted room. In at the window flew a large elephant-hawk moth. The moth hit itself against the wall, dropped on to the floor, and crawled under a chair. There the dog spied it as it moved slowly along, and, thinking it was a mouse, made for it. Just as his nose nearly touched the insect's back it flew up in his face with a faint " whirr " of misty wings. The hunter swiftly became the hunted—or rather he fled, though no man or moth pursued. Out of the door he bolted and into another room, where he took refuge in the darkest corner under a bed ; there he lay for a long time shivering with fright and refusing to move. Doubtless his dreams were haunted for many a day with dark horrors of flying mice.

VIII

Once or twice lately, when the pale wintry sun has been shining, I have found a company of pond-skaters basking at mid-day in the warmth of its slanting rays. All the summer through these spider-like insects are seen skipping and skating and sliding over the surface of the water, but chilly weather makes them seek convenient landing-stages where they can sun themselves, and intense cold drives them into close retreat. A band of pond-skaters—or skip-jacks, as the children call them—presents a very odd appearance when spread out to dry on the timber of a culvert or on the upper side of some drain-pipe which carries storm-water into the river. The creatures dispose themselves in such a fashion that the tips of the legs of each one of them touch—or over-lap—the tips of the legs of the next ; arranged thus, the whole party looks curiously like a veil of coarse black net with wide meshes and elongated spots, laid over the damp-stained wood or piping. Pond-skaters bear a closer resemblance to spiders than is shown by any other insect ; this close resemblance to the spider-form is partly due to the fact that they appear, at a casual glance, to have eight legs instead of the orthodox six. It is, of course, unnecessary to explain that all spiders have eight legs, and that no insects have more than six ; but the skaters are furnished with long, jointed antennæ, which may easily be mistaken for a fourth pair of legs

set well forward on the thorax and protruding from under the head. All six of the skip-jack's legs are made use of when the insect is afloat and feeding ; the first two reach out and seize the prey—small larvæ and so on—the second two serve as oars, and the last pair trails behind and acts as a rudder. The bodies and legs of the pond-skaters are sand-brown, and when the light shines full upon them as they glide over the surface of a shallow, sunny stream, the insects themselves are far less easily seen than the black shadows which they cast on the sandy or pebbly bottom beneath them ; the conspicuousness of these dark shadows renders the protective colouring of the skaters useless—that is to say, if they are spied on by enemies who look down from above. It is worth noticing that the moment one of these skip-jacks dives right under the water, it ceases to be a dull, brown object, and becomes a little shining being clad in bright silver ; every part of its body is covered with a coating of inconceivably fine, short, “ fur ” which cannot be wetted, and which retains, clinging to the tips of the microscopic hairs, a film of air that gleams like metal or crystal when seen through the clear water of the stream.

This silvery appearance produced by a thin integument of air or by a series of separate tiny bubbles, is visible on many other submerged objects, animate and inanimate besides pond-skaters. The furry water-vole carries down with him, when he dives and swims among the shoals of weed, a quantity of air adhering to his coat ; with the result that under water the warm, brown of his

colouring entirely disappears, and he turns into a hoary-looking grey beast. It is naturally a great advantage to semi-aquatic creatures to be clothed in this manner with a protective film of air; they emerge from their plunge with perfectly dry bodies, and their movements on leaving the water are not in any way impeded. No sooner does the vole land on an island of weed or a promontory of the river-bank, than every drop of moisture runs off him; he gives himself an almost imperceptible shake, and then sits down and brushes and combs his pretty fur in comfort. The long blades of the floating-grass which is so conspicuous a feature of our meadows, habitually rest on the surface of the water, and trail down-stream, up-borne and waved to and fro by the current; if they are thrust under for a moment and held down with a stick, their verdure changes to glistening silver and they look like strings and straps of glass; coated thus with air, they do not become sodden and rotten when they are by chance drowned in a swollen brook.

IX

“Sale price, three-and-elevenpence!” This is a ticket in a shop-window—on what? On a woman’s hat decorated with a pair of out-spread sea-gull’s wings. What was the beginning of the bird, of which this is the end? A freckled, pointed egg, warmed beneath the mother’s breast and the mother’s beating heart;

a downy chick safe lodged on a shelf of the tall cliffs, while two watchful parents sweep backwards and forwards over the water, carrying food or uttering defiant screams at the first hint of danger ; and then the launch of the fledgling from the nesting-rocks, where it has stretched its untried pinions and called and called, and hopped from point to point, dreading and yet longing to set sail in the wide, blue air. When at last the swift sharply-angled wings have borne the young bird away from the shelter of the land, its keen eyes look down upon "the innumerable laughter of the seas," the sun shines on its smooth feathers and stirs its blood, and the summer breezes sing above the twinkling waves, and above the fragrant furze, the patches of pink thrift and sheets of yellow trefoil, on the cliff-top. Gold and azure and turquoise, glowing sunlight, boundless freedom, and a flock of happy, circling birds—that was the beginning ; and this is the end. A shop-window hideous with meaningless rows of trivial hats, and set amongst the dreary array, a pair of dead, white wings—dead, and not fluttering to decent decay on some lonely shore, but offered for the bedizenment of the ignoble head of any heartless woman, devoid of imagination, sympathy, or loving-kindness, who chooses to expend three-and-elevenpence on their purchase. Living and moving and waving in the air, the wings were worth more than fine gold, their price was far above rubies ; dead and dusty and pilloried in a shop, they are worth—with a handful of straw and ribbon thrown into the bargain—a few poor pence and shillings.

And yet we stand by, complacent and acquiescent, while the beautiful, wild creatures, who should be our joy and pride, are turned into bundles of cheap merchandise which no one wants.

MARCH

MARCH

I

ACCORDING to the Almanack, spring begins at 5.18 a.m. on March 21st, when the sun enters Aries; in common parlance, the spring begins on the first day of the first spring month, March. But for each one of us the spring begins on some particular day, early or late, when, on throwing open a window, or turning a corner of a road, or reaching the top of a hill, we are aware of a new feeling in the air—an added freshness and sweetness, an indescribable exhilaration, which almost makes one catch one's breath. Spring began this year on Tuesday, March 4th; if someone is found to dispute this statement, and to say that it began at least a fortnight sooner, and if someone else is ready to affirm that it certainly did not begin till quite a week later, all these contradictory assertions may be accepted as equally true—there will be no convincing any one of us that the spring did not begin on the day, when, suddenly, we felt it meet and greet us on our way.

March roared like a lion on the fourth day of his incoming; but the roar was the roar of a noble beast

rejoicing in his strength and not the roar of sullen anger. South-west winds swept the meadows and swept the hillside, and shook the clear rain-drops from the hazel-tassels, and sent last autumn's dead leaves whirling along the roads. On high-lying arable fields the rich brown loam of the newly-turned furrows drank in all the soft moisture as quickly as it fell ; and mated lapwings swung low above the ground, and wailed piteously when a plough-boy tramped across the ridges and trespassed on the land that they had chosen for their territory. The birds' loud cries, and their tumbling, hurried flight, seemed to speak of eggs already laid, but possibly their excitement only proved that even the patch of rough earth destined to hold their treasures, had become sacred in their eyes from the moment of its adoption. The crest of the downs caught the full force of the gale ; a wayfarer walking northwards was almost able to lean back against the wind and get support from the driving gusts, but when the path led towards the south, a bent head and raised shoulders had to be butted into the blast, and the luxury of the clean rain blowing straight into the face, foregone. Here and there the chocolate-purple blackthorns in the hedges displayed wide-open flowers among their crowded, brown-flushed buds, but not the smallest vestige of green leaf or shoot was to be seen on them ; this absence of green leaf distinguishes the wild sloe-tree, even in sheltered spots, from the cultivated varieties of thorn whose early flowers often deceive people into crying prematurely : " The blackthorn is out ! "

The brightest spot of colour in all the country-side on this wild March afternoon, was a yellowhammer which hopped across a road—an empty road, stretching away, weather-washed and bare, to right and to left—and then flew up and alighted on the topmost spray of a bush and looked out across the rifts in the downs. The sky was grey, Winchester lay half-hidden in silver-grey mist, the streams and flooded ditches mapping the valley gleamed metallic white, the turf that rose and sank with the undulations of the land showed grey-green or russet according to the falling of the light, and every hedge-row shrub and isolated hawthorn on the grass, was darkened to a heavy brown by the soaking moisture. In this sombre world the yellowhammer shone and glowed; the drifting rain had no power to dim the lustre of its nuptial plumage, and the pure yellow of its head and neck, and the citron and ruddy chestnut of its body, lit up the grey day and proclaimed the coming of the season of courtship and wedded love. Presently, a whole company of sea-gulls rose from the cultivated fields to the north-east; almost every gull in the little band had donned his black mask—another sure sign that the time for pairing and nesting is close at hand—and, as with faces set seawards they passed overhead, now and then one or other of the birds stooped low enough for the coral-red of his bill to be discerned. Watching the sea-gulls' struggling flight, it seemed impossible that they could ever win to their sleeping-places by tidal waters before sunset. They beat up against the wind, and tacked and veered, and again and again were swept

backwards, but by slow degrees progress was made and the shoulder of the hill turned, and it is probable that a less strong current was encountered in the valley beyond.

Bright colour in the meadows was furnished by a sheet of marsh-marigolds—at last, a whole sheet of golden blossoms and not merely a solitary clump uprising in some sheltered corner. The round, polished leaves glistened in the rain, and the big, wet flowers, thick stalks, and swollen tawny buds, were strong and stiff as vigorous health and growth could make them; they “Took the winds of March with beauty.” High above the marigolds, above the dabchicks on the river, above the dipping wagtails and the starlings catching gnats with swallow-mocking flight, went a bird borne on quivering wings and moving always in a wide circle from west to north, from north to east, and through the south to west again. It was not necessary to wait until the beating of his aerial bounds brought the bird straight overhead, and showed the angled wings and incredibly long beak, to know what manner of fowl it was that was flying in so curious a fashion: the snipe is recognised at the first glance by everyone who is familiar with his form and ways. Whether a snipe zig-zags up from the marsh “scaping,” or calls “zip-zap, zip-zap,” as he dashes through the reeds and scrubby willows in company with his mate, or drums musically in the long spring afternoons and moonlit nights—by all lovers of wild things he is always seen and heard with peculiar pleasure. A haunter of lonely sedge-girt places, where brown peat-

water stands in the quagmires—and buckbean and marsh-orchis, lousewort and pale valerian, flourish each in their season—the snipe is, in his own way, worth more to us than all the sleek pensioners in our back gardens, who have sold their birthright of proud independence for a mess of soaked crusts and hempseed. This snipe who was circling far above the meadow in the gusty, moisture-laden air, was clearly drumming—or “bleating”—but the sound of his performance was lost in the rush and whistle of the wind and the gurgling of the over-full brooks. After every few yards of curving flight on one plane, the bird never failed to swerve suddenly downwards, and each time that he so swerved, the strange bleating noise—though inaudible to listening human ears—was undoubtedly made by the passage of the air through his out-standing tail feathers.

II

Never can there have been a more lovely moonlight night than that between the 17th and 18th of this month. At midnight I was sitting on the bridge below Itchen Stoke Mill, and there the scene was wonderfully beautiful. Not a cloud floated in the sky and not a breath of wind fluttered the air. Even the topmost twigs of the trees in Ovington Park rested motionless, the black network of their tracery sharply defined against the luminous grey beyond. Each blade of grass and dry, feathered reed was thickly encrusted with frost, and the meadows

lay white and level on either side of the glittering river, which broke the moonlight into quivering flakes of silver.

Under the bridge the water sucked and gurgled ; every now and then a startled wild-duck rose with a succession of splashings and loud quacks, the abrupt cry of a solitary coot sounded from the sedges, and wakeful lapwings, stirring in the fields, called almost without ceasing. Except for these bird voices, and the flow of the stream, the silence was unbroken. No baying farm dog disturbed the perfect quiet, only as I came up from Avington, through Itchen Abbas, between one and two o'clock, a cock sent out a ringing greeting through the stillness, and was answered by another, and then a third. After a few moments the crows grew fainter, and finally ceased—Chanticleer stretched a lazy leg and wing and turned to his dreams again—and the whole world lay fast asleep.

III

It is, I think, a pity that when new weather-vanes are put up on churches they are not more often made in the shape of cocks. How many old weather-cocks one sees, and how few new ones ! Durley, has a fine cock, and so, too—to mention only a few other Hampshire churches—have Prior's Dean, Selborne, Farringdon, Hursley, and Brockenhurst. An arrow—a favourite form for the pointer of a modern vane to take

—is meaningless, or if it means anything at all its associations are merely warlike. A gunner with his gun makes a suitable vane for a block of barracks, and a running fox for kennels, and why should not the tower or spire of a Christian church be always crowned with a Christian sign? The cock has long been connected by folk-lore and tradition both with weather prophecies and with Christian symbolism ; old Quarles, in his *Divine Fancies*, unites the two legendary aspects of the cock, in verse of which the quaintness would not be tolerated if it were the work of a modern poet or divine :—

“ The crowing of a cock doth oft foreshow
A change of weather ; Peter found it so
The cock no sooner crew, but, by and by,
He found a change of weather in his eye.”

The cock in the farmyard “ proclaims the crimson dawn of day ” and forecasts the weather ; his effigy on the steeple tells the way of the wind and “ Rouses souls from slumber into thoughts of heaven.”

What is the most accurate weather-cock to consult at this season of the year? We may tell the direction of the wind to a nicety any evening by observing the way in which the rooks have settled themselves for the night in their roosting-trees. Look up at the branches of a group of nest-bearing elms, and you will see a whole company of jet black weather-cocks, as still as if carved out of coal, each bird sitting with its beak pointing exactly to the quarter from which the wind blows.

The birds, of course, choose this position in order that they may present to the force of the wind that part of them which is narrowest and offers the least resistance to the blast, *i.e.*, their heads, beaks and breasts. Their beaks cleave the air in precisely the same way as the bows of a vessel, from the prow of a Roman galley to the nose of a torpedo-destroyer, cleave the water. If the rooks were to go to sleep broadside to the wind, or with their tails turned to it, not only would it be impossible for them to maintain their balance during their rest, owing to the air beating against a large surface of their bodies, but they would also suffer much discomfort from their feathers being ruffled and blown about. Placed as they are, the breeze passes over the birds in the same direction as their feathers naturally lie, and they can sleep undisturbed through all but the roughest weather.

IV

The first month of spring never comes round without bringing back to one's memory the old saying, "In March the rooks pick up all the dirt." The blustering winds dry up the puddles in the roads and convert the mud into dust which "is worth a king's ransom," and the rooks descend to the ground to gather fallen sticks, and also to feed, if possible, near home—for they do not care to make long excursions into the country when they are building and repairing their nests. The sticks

and branchlets which the rooks pick up are for the most part those which they have themselves dropped. In this they differ from jackdaws, who are said—perhaps with more certainty than the facts warrant—never to condescend to recover from the earth any stick that they by chance let fall. Rooks, as is well known, are particularly fond of building in elms, and they often weave their nests almost entirely of twigs and sticks torn from other elm-trees. Day after day, one may see the big black fowls perched aloft in some high tree red with blossom ; each bird tugs and pulls at a carefully-chosen bough until the portion selected is snapped off and detached ; then the broad wings are spread, and with many tacks and driftings in the wind the crooked stick is borne away to the nest. Sometimes a rook makes a mistake in the way he lays hold of his burden ; unless he grasps it with his beak well in the middle, it gives him serious trouble—the longer end is carried round by its weight, or blown backwards by the buffeting air, and knocks against his wing, or it sags downwards and the short end turns upwards, and he is forced to drop it from his strained mandibles. To fly out among an interlacing network of twigs, with a stick held crosswise in the bill, cannot, in any case, be an easy task. The red-brown flowers which fur and knot the elm-boughs in early spring—William Morris's " buds of the dear spring weather " which " fall like tears "—make a most becoming background to the sleek, coal-black forms of the great birds.

V

On Thursday, the 20th, I came upon the thrice-welcome sight of a chiff-chaff feeding among the blossomed boughs of a willow, below St. Cross. For a long time I stood and watched the slender, olive bird, hoping to hear his call, but he refused to utter a sound. Presently he flew away to a hawthorn at a little distance ; then a faint echo of the sweet, familiar "chiff-chaff, chiff-chaff," came floating back to me, almost drowned by the whistling of the wind in the trees. "No one," says Warde Fowler, "who hails the approach of spring as the real beginning of a new life for men and plants and animals, can fail to be grateful to this little brown bird for putting on it the stamp and sanction of his clear, resonant voice. . . . Not even the first twitter of the swallow, or the earliest song of the nightingale, has the same hopeful story to tell us as this delicate traveller who dares the east wind and the frost." As I turned homewards, after watching the warbler, it was with great pleasure that I remembered the following passage in Gilbert White's letters: "March 20th, 1792. . . . Wonderful is the regularity observed by Nature ! I have often remarked that the smallest willow-wren, called here the chif-chaf, from its two loud sharp notes, is always the first bird of passage, and that it is heard usually on March 20th, when, behold, as I was writing this very page, my servant looked in at the parlour door, and said that a neighbour had heard the chif-chaf this

morning ! ” I am sure that the writer would be pleased if he could know that even yet, after the passing of a hundred and thirty years, the Hampshire chiff-chaff is still faithful to the same date !

There is something very charming about the insight which this passage gives us into Gilbert White’s surroundings, and the ways of his household. The swiftness with which the news of the little migrant’s arrival is carried to The Wakes, and the assurance of the servant that his master will welcome an interruption that brings him such pleasant tidings, tell a tale of a friendly and happy relationship between the old parson-naturalist and his neighbours and dependants ; it is evident that all who were associated with him were quick to observe for his benefit, any interesting event in the natural world, and as his deafness increased upon him he must have greatly valued their attention.

VI

It was among the branches of a willow that a year ago I watched a chiff-chaff, and heard a strange and unlooked-for song. We all know the chiff-chaff’s call : “ Chiff-chaff, chiff-chaff,” repeated incessantly. “ The two notes,” it has been said, “ vary as slightly in tone as two taps of a hammer on an anvil delivered with equal force on the same spot. This is the whole song.” Another observer writes : “ We may grow tired of his two notes—he never gets beyond two—for he sings

almost the whole summer through." Every authority—with perhaps a single exception—says the same thing. It was, then, with a surprise amounting almost to consternation that I heard the little bird produce three distinct sounds besides its orthodox note! It is true that aloud it sang only "chiff-chaff, chiff-chaff," but under its breath, as it were for my ear alone, in the pauses between its recurring dissyllable, it warbled and scolded and piped. No words can express the charm of the delicate tones; a charm heightened by their total unexpectedness and a sense of mystery. The tiny being—daring to set at nought the rules laid down for his conduct by the wise writers of books—was imparting to me his secret: that he could, and would, warble, but not for a careless and indifferent world to hear.

VII

It is, I think, remarkable, that so little has been written by ornithologists about the under-song—or, as it is sometimes called, the "recording"—of birds. This under-song cannot fail to be of great interest to a every bird-lover, and it would be most instructive to hear what some competent authority has to say on the matter. In the first place one would like to know whether all singing birds have under-songs—that is, whether they are all in the habit of singing at times in an "inward" voice, "under their breath"; secondly, in what circumstances the under-songs are usually

uttered ; and thirdly, whether these under-songs always exactly resemble the ordinary songs of the same species when uttered aloud. The birds that I have myself heard producing under songs, are thrush, blackbird, robin, lark, blackcap, gold-crest, and chiff-chaff—a fair proportion of our common singers ; and it appears from what I have observed, that the inward songs may be delivered in obedience to either one of two entirely diverse sets of impulses—they may be uttered when the bird is angry, or they may be uttered when the bird is in a state of supreme and placid content. Perhaps, however, the angry songs cannot correctly be called under-songs, for they are mere snatches and splutters of melody “ exclaimed ”—there is no other word for it—in moments of great excitement. A week or two ago I watched two larks chasing each other over a grass field, while their brethren were singing their hearts out high up in the air ; as the hunter and the hunted swerved and doubled and swept now this way and now that, from time to time one or other of the birds sang suddenly, and angrily, a true lark phrase scarcely above his breath. In like manner I have seen a couple of lusty thrushes fighting in a ditch, and have heard each of them utter at intervals a quick, low note—a mere whisper of a song, and yet, as in the case of the lark, a detached fragment of a tune proper to the bird. But the real under-song that is apt to give the human listener peculiar pleasure, is always produced when the singer is sitting quietly at rest in some sheltered spot, and is for the moment serenely confident that his lot has fallen unto him in a fair ground.

VIII

In the spring even the cold-blooded frog is seized with the love-passion and forthwith he would a-wooing go. Whether he puts on a new coat as a preparation for courtship I do not know, but I certainly never saw a smarter set of frogs than I found sitting round a way-side pond the other day. All round the edge of a square pond they sat, either completely submerged or with their eyes and nostrils just above the surface. It was the concentric rings on the water, which one or other of them incessantly set in motion by some slight movement, that drew my attention to their presence in the muddy shallows. Frogs of all sizes and colour were attending the spring meeting. Some sat solitary, lost in meditation, and completely motionless, except for the regular movements of their throats, with eyes fixed on the heavens and swaying arms outstretched, and a few were swimming vigorously to and fro; a frog swimming reveals a length of leg which is unsuspected when he squats upon the ground. Some were pairing; and others had already been engaged in the business of oviposition, for an irregular mass of spawn, as large as a football, was to be seen in one place. Frogs' spawn always suggests to me an uncleanly and much-magnified sago pudding. In the centre of each grain of sago a black speck is visible; this is the embryo tadpole. There is an astonishing difference of colour in different frogs. I noticed one

individual who was the exact shade of a dark chestnut horse ; another was arrayed all over in lustrous yellow-green, like the iris of a cat's eye, and yet another was so marked and coloured as to bear a close resemblance to a plover's egg. Floating at her ease lay a very large frog, heavy with spawn, who must, I should think, have been the great-grandmother of the whole tribe. She was excessively handsome, her pale sage-green skin, with its under-lying metallic sheen, being patterned all over with black pencillings. When all the eggs have hatched, how many creatures will find in this pond a rich feeding-ground and wax fat on a diet of wriggling tadpoles ?

IX

There is no better place for the study of wild life of certain kinds than the bed of a river from which most of the water has been drained off through opened hatches. When shallow streams trickle between mud-banks, and islands of weed and drift rise up in mid-channel, then an abundance of food is laid bare and bird and beast resort to the inviting spot. Water-rats sit on the wet peninsulas and promontories, nibbling bits of root or stem, grey and pied wagtails run over the soft ooze and leave behind them fairy footprints, and moorhens and coot pick and choose from the banquet spread before them the things that please them best ; while bright-eyed

thrushes and blackbirds hop about under the banks and enjoy the unusual experience of feasting with ease on luxuries that generally lie hidden out of sight and out of reach below the surface of the water. I spent some time one day beside a river-bed such as I have described, and watched the birds exploring the detached islets and busying themselves among the clumps of reed left high and dry by the flow of the diminished current. Lurking in the shadow of some sedges I saw a dusky form that I failed for a moment to identify; before I decided what the creature was, it stepped boldly into the open and waded towards me through a little pool. With infinite caution I approached nearer and nearer until I was scarcely half-a-dozen yards from one of the shyest of our birds—a water-rail. Through my glasses every detail of its plumage was as plainly visible as if I had had it under my hand: the beautiful black markings on the rich brown back and head, the smooth uniform lead-grey of the breast, cheeks and neck, and the white bars across the flanks. The beak is long and reddish—the base of the lower mandible being a very bright red—and the legs are dark flesh-colour. Many birds, including our domestic fowls, move their heads in time with their steps; but I never saw any bird thrust its head forward so perpetually and energetically as this rail; it appeared to be incessantly swallowing, and to be suffering from some affection of the throat that made the effort of swallowing painful and difficult.

X

The thirty-first of March will remain for ever marked in my memory as a day of days, for on it, I saw, for the first time, a living, wild hoopoe. Tidings reached me that the bird had for nearly a week been haunting a certain spot in Hampshire, and as soon as possible after receiving the news I journeyed to the favoured place, and, under the guidance of a naturalist, who had already twice seen the visitor, watched and waited for its appearance. We trod lightly on soft turf, so that our footsteps should not startle the hoopoe if it were lurking anywhere close at hand; we peered round the corners of hedges and peeped between the branches of trees and shrubs; we scanned the ground near and far through field-glasses, but for a long time all in vain. Presently we came upon a man who was in the secret of the bird's sojourn in the neighbourhood—and who was under orders from the kindly owners of the land, to protect it—and him we asked whether it had been seen anywhere about that day. "Yes," he said, "up till half-an-hour earlier the strange bird had been feeding at the very spot where he was at that moment at work, then it had flown away down over there." "Down over there" we went, with renewed hope, only to be again disappointed. Was the hoopoe determined to act Gabriel to our Evangeline till we wearied of the search? An hour or more had passed before the eagerly-expected moment came, when one of us at last caught sight of an unfamiliar form

moving slowly over a stretch of mown grass not many yards from where we were standing ; a subdued exclamation called attention to the discovery, and field-glasses were cautiously raised in hands that almost shook with excitement. Yet field-glasses were scarcely needed to examine so large a bird at such close quarters. The first impression one received was of a buff-brown bird about the size of a green woodpecker, or somewhat smaller, with a slow, pacing gait that was not unlike the gait of a domestic fowl ; the dark legs struck one as being noticeably short in proportion to the length of the body, which was slender rather than stout. Every picture of the hoopoe which I had ever come across, had represented the splendid crest as standing erect, but this creature's top-knot was pressed flat to its crown while it walked about the grass and hunted for food, and the crest-feathers were only seen as a blunt tuft curved outwards from the back of the head ; as though to balance this tuft, the slender, arched bill projected two inches or more in front. By far the most remarkable and conspicuous thing about the bird was the zebra-banding of its back, which was shown to full advantage when it turned away from us ; alternate stripes of black and white barred the shoulders transversely, and the edges of these stripes were so clear-cut and sharp that they looked as if they had been laid on with thick paint—that a pattern so hard should be formed by materials so soft as feathers, seemed extremely curious. It was evident that food was abundant in this secluded spot where the shy visitor had chosen to linger, for his

thin black—or pitch brown—beak was thrust into the turf again and again, and almost every time the ground was probed, something was extracted and swallowed—"leather-jackets," the larvæ of the crane-fly, a spectator said, and, if it was indeed the case that quantities of these mischievous grubs were being destroyed, the hoopoe was without doubt proving itself as useful as it was beautiful. All the published accounts of the various hoopoes observed from time to time in different parts of England, speak of their tameness, and also of their timidity, and this wanderer was no exception to the rule. Only when he was approached too closely by someone who was anxious to secure a photograph of him, did he move off; and even then he did not fly away, but merely slipped through the bottom of a hedge and disappeared from view. When again approached, on the farther side of the fence, the bird became agitated and suspicious, and put up its crest with a quick movement—thus displaying its full beauty. The crest is magnificent; the red-brown feathers are tipped with black and white, and they stand up in a high ridge which extends from the base of the beak almost to the nape of the neck.

Before we left the hoopoe's territory, we had the satisfaction of seeing him on the wing; finding himself hemmed in on either side by human beings—a couple of men employed on the ground having come up to the line of bushes which he seemed to look on as a place of retreat—he flew into a tree, and then flew again from branch to branch. With lowered crest and spread wings,

and the pale buff under surface of his body exposed to view, he appeared in no way remarkable or conspicuous. In order to fully appreciate the beauty and singularity of this bird's form and plumage, it must always be necessary to view him walking on turf or path or meadow-grass, with his oddly-decorated back well below the level of the observer's eye. And on the ground he at all times prefers to walk; everyone who had an opportunity of watching this particular hoopoe, described him as being most reluctant to take flight—only when seriously alarmed would he rise into the air and seek refuge in some tree. We were told that one of his favourite haunts was the channelled border of a wide gravel path; along this border he was frequently to be seen stepping sedately, with only the top of his head appearing above the edge of the grass.

APRIL

APRIL

I

NOW that spring has really come, one is struck once more by the vast variety of green tints to be found in the vegetable world; the autumn wealth of russet, brown, amber, and crimson, is matched by the wealth of tender, softly-shaded greens of the opening year. Take a thicket of willows alone: one tree will show a silvery sage-green, another, a green of an olive hue, another, a vivid emerald-green, and yet another, a green that is almost golden. The green of leaves and budding foliage, mingles with the green of flowers. It seems that as a general rule—a rule to which there are, of course, many exceptions—the plants which flower first in the spring tend to produce green blossoms; possibly this is because so few insects are abroad in the chill air of January and February that it is not worth while for the flowers to take much trouble to attract their notice—they have to adopt other means to secure fertilisation. Among the earliest English plants to put forth blossoms, even before the dead of the winter is well over, are the two native hellebores—first the setterwort, *Helleborus foetidus*, and a little later the

bear's-foot, *H. viridis*; these both bear green flowers, and they are followed in the woods by the delicately-scented spurge-laurel, the perennial mercury, and the fragile moschatell—all green-blossomed plants.

No green is more brilliant and intense than the green of the bloom on the Norway maple, *Acer platanoides*; early in April it is in perfection, and many shrubberies and dull suburban roads are glorified by the patches of clear, strong colour which break out all over the twigs and branches. An almost exactly similar tint is found in the flower of a very different plant—the golden saxifrage, *Chrysosplenium*. This little herb—which grows to a height of only four or five inches—loves to root itself in some moist bank beside a ditch where a thread of water trickles, and the heads of tender leaves and tiny blossoms crowd so closely together on the ground, that they form one continuous sheet of yellow-green; like the tall maple, they make sunshine of their own on the dullest day.

II

Nowhere have I seen so many flowers of wood-sorrel as I saw this spring among the moss and brown litter under the trees of Selborne Hanger. The half-transparent white cups—too fragile to bear plucking by rough human fingers—drooped here, there and everywhere above clusters of pale-green trefoil leaves, and showed an inconceivably delicate veining on their petals; so thickly did they grow upon the damp, congenial soil of the beech-

wood, that in some places the ground was flecked all over with their whiteness, just as one often sees it flecked in hazel-copses with the whiteness of anemones. There is, I think, no other British flower that can compare in tender grace and purity with the wood-sorrel. That the modest beauty of its blossoms has always and everywhere attracted notice, the many different names that have been bestowed upon it prove. In old English literature—"and," says Prior, "in German, French, Italian and Spanish"—the wood-sorrel is called Hallelujah, because "it blossoms between Easter and Whitsuntide, the season at which the Psalms were sung which end with that word, those, namely, from the 113th to the 117th." We thus know that the charm of the little woodland plant was already appreciated in England in pre-Reformation days when the Latin Psalms, and the order in which they were used day by day in the churches, were familiar to all godly folk. Other names given to the sorrel, are "Cuckoo's bread" and "Cuckoo's meat," in allusion to the fact that when the bloom appears on this plant, the cuckoo appears in the woods and lanes. Hampshire country-people more often associate the coming of the cuckoo with a spring blossom of a different kind—the "Lady's smock," "Milk-Maids," or "Cuckoo-flower." In every field and on every bank at Selborne, I found this cuckoo-flower growing and revelling in the abundant moisture that seems to make the air of the sheltered village soft and humid at all seasons; large patches of the Churchyard grass were almost hidden under a mist of its pale-lilac buds and blossoms.

III

Tennyson, addressing an old yew-tree in a churchyard, remarks that "the seasons bring the flower again," and then exclaims :

" O, not for thee the glow, the bloom,
Who changest not in any gale,
Nor branding summer suns avail
To touch thy thousand years of gloom."

Is the bloom, indeed, not for the yew? Then why does the poet say a little later on, when he is speaking once more to the same tree :

" Old warder of these buried bones,
And answering now my random stroke,
With fruitful cloud and living smoke " ?

He thus proves that he was aware that in its own time even the sombre yew breaks out into bloom and tosses abroad abundant yellow pollen to be carried on its fertilizing errand by the breeze. And Tennyson was not merely aware that the yew produces its blossoms as surely as the scented lime and the golden sycamore put forth their flowers ; he seems to have been particularly interested in its manner of doing so—and he knew at what season the blossoms appear—for in another place he again describes the pollen-clouds :

“ They sat
Beneath a world-old yew tree darkening half
The cloisters, on a gustful April morn
That puff'd the swaying branches into smoke
Above them.”

And he can hardly have failed to notice—for passage after passage in his writings bears witness to his observant habit of mind—that “ summer suns ” do avail each year to “ touch the gloom ” of the trees. Just now on every yew the tip of every twig is showing a tuft of fresh green leaves : leaves as green and as fresh as the young leaves of apple or of birch. Gales may not change the stubborn foliage, but spring brings a wealth of glowing bloom, and the warm sunbeams touch the thousand-wintered gloom with points of bright, new life.

IV

Tucked away in remote corners of the country, lost—how happily—among green lanes and hedges and lonely commons, there are still to be found in our southern counties, small farms which modern progress and all the ways and fashions that are vulgarly called “ up to date,” have never yet come near. One such farm I visited a week or two ago, and in visiting it I felt that I had stepped back through the better part of a century into a more dignified and self-respecting age—an age when people were content to rest quietly from year to year

on their own plot of ground and eat the labours of their hands in peace and sober cheerfulness. It was impossible to associate any idea of hasting to grow rich, and of laying up great store in barns, with the little homestead ; but, no doubt, the dwellers in it have always won a living from the land, and have never wanted for plenty of wholesome food, the fruit of their careful toil and good management. And what can man ask better than a safe home, a warm hearth, pure air, "his meat in due season," and the honourable estate of upright independence ?

By what road the farmer whose home I went to see takes his stuff to market, I do not know. There may be some metalled highway, hidden behind trees and hedge-rows, that passes not far from his gates ; but I made my way to the spot through a wood, and across a common, and up a rough cart-track enclosed on either side by hawthorns and blackthorns, which overhang stretches of damp grass where cowslips grow. Willow-wrens and thrushes were singing in the golden-green oak-wood, on the open common—brown with dry heather—yellow-hammers flew from one tangled brake to another, and peewits cried over the fields, bewailing their lives of ceaseless anxiety. The magic of spring was in the air, and it needed no gift of second-sight to be acutely aware of the stir of new life that was throbbing all about one—the hundreds of blue and brown and freckled eggs concealed in bush and bank—each holding within its shell the quickening germ of a fresh-created being—and the multitude of fledglings breathing and feeding and growing

in their nests, and being swiftly prepared by nature to go out and play their part in the beautiful world.

To get to the farm-house, one had to stoop under horizontal wooden bars placed across an opening in the hedge, and then to make one's way through a paddock to a wicket-gate in a low wall. An old collie-dog lay on the grass outside the gate and supposed himself to be guarding his master's property, but except for a few smothered barks uttered with half-closed jaws, he made no effort to warn off intruders ; perhaps he was reluctant to disturb the cat who had curled herself up close beside him with head against his shoulder. A comfortable square house, the colour of its bricks enriched by years of sun and weather, the farmer's dwelling looks out over a long garden-plot that runs down to the lane ; away beyond the boundary fence, and beyond the yard and out-buildings, the lime-trees that are the glory of the place, lift up their heads. These trees, standing in a line parallel with the garden, are very tall, with noble growth of limb and branch ; and, mercifully, no

“ Axe and saw have been busy there
For the landlord's wealth, for the tenants' air,
And the rook's great grief—and mine.”

Within the old farm-house there is no shock of new paint and teasing patterned walls ; all has been mellowed by time to a homeliness and friendliness that could not have come by seeking. The roomy “ house-place ” owns an open hearth, with iron kettle hanging from a

hook and chain above the fire, and a wide chimney in which a whole pig is sometimes suspended. At right angles to the hearth, a finely-carved oak press is built into the wall, and under the ceiling a wooden rack is fixed, for the safe-keeping of flitches of bacon and any other stores that need to be protected from damp and from the thievings of mice and rats. In the back-kitchen is the large brick-oven in which bread is still baked as it was baked in the days of our grandmothers. This oven is heated with big faggots called "bavins"—a word familiar to all Hampshire folk—and when it is at the right degree of hotness, the wood-ash is swept out with a broom dipped in water, and the loaves are put in to cook in an even heat that ensures their being perfectly baked all through. I had the pleasure—a very real one—of seeing the batch of bread which had been made the day before my visit to the farm, and it looked and smelt most excellent. I also saw the broom that had been used for cleaning the oven, and, besides this partially-worn implement, a new one that had never been called into service. These brooms were made—as all brooms required for a like purpose should be made—of green twigs of the common, golden-flowered broom, tightly bound together with split hazel-rods, into the shape of an ordinary garden, "besom." It is worthy of note that the name of the household tool was in the first place derived from the popular name of the plant, *Cytisus scoparius*, that furnished the twigs and sticks of which it was composed—and that the plant did *not*, as is sometimes supposed, take its name from the uses

to which it was put. The new broom that was shown to me was freshly-made, and it had on it many swelling buds, half-opened and revealing the yellow petals within ; this, it was explained, was a mistake—the branches should have been cut earlier in the year before the blossom was so far advanced. Probably the old superstitious dislike to bringing blossomed broom into the house in May—most of us have been familiar from childhood with the rhymed couplet that tells of this superstition—had its origin in nothing more mysterious than the plain fact that broom-twigs thick with tender blossoms are ill-suited for the sweeping of a hard brick surface—the only purpose for which they would be likely to be brought into a house. It is, of course, obvious that green brush-wood is used to removed the hot ashes, because dry, sapless twigs, even if dipped in water, as the green ones are, would be liable to catch fire.

It was pleasant to be told of the days, after all not so very long passed by, when village children would run crying to their elders, “ The broom-squire, the broom-squire,” and busy house-wives would hurry out to meet the man coming down the road heavily laden with green brooms. The same man travelled one accustomed round year after year, and always found ready purchasers of his goods ; no cottage mother with a large family to bake for, was willing to let the broom-squire go on his way without buying from him. The charge for a broom was—as it still is—one penny ; this seems an extraordinarily cheap rate at which to sell a well-made broom-head, even if it lacks the handle that must be fitted to

it before it is used. First the broom boughs have to be gathered from the bushes, then the right quantity of straight twigs must be selected and pressed firmly together and rounded to the broom shape, and girt about with hazel-bands, which must also need a certain amount, of care in their preparation, and finally the whole head has to be trimmed up, and cut off sharp and square at the stump end. A good day's work must have gone to the earning of a few shillings when a man made broom-fashioning his trade and gave his whole energies to the job. Even after a stock of brooms had been manufactured there was still time and labour to be expended in travelling from house to house and from village to village, before the money was safe in the "squire's" pocket.

As I turned from the little, remote farm, and set my face towards the well-trodden ways of men, it seemed to me that it would not be difficult to possess a "mind innocent and quiet," if one's lot were cast in such a fair ground. The long summer days would be filled so full of loveliness and healthful occupation that no room would be left for envious discontent or lamentations over the evils of the universe. To rise before the sun and look out upon a misty world with the grass all grey with dew, and the drenched buttercups and clover-blossoms hanging their heavy heads; to hear the earliest thrushes singing among the apple-boughs and rousing the lazy blackbirds from their slumbers; to get through long hours of useful work that leaves behind it definite result and accomplishment; to rest at last within sound

of the owl's cry and the goatsucker's reeling and the mysterious night-noises of the lonely country-side—all this must surely make life worth living and one's sojourn on the earth a thing to be thankful for each day. And the winter, with hoar-frost and snow, and fieldfares calling across the plough-land and redwings on the pastures—and a big fire on the hearth and a comfortable chair in the chimney-corner—must be scarcely less beautiful, or less apt to breed a spirit of cheerfulness in hearts willing to be happy and contented.

V

A starling who has a nest on my house picks daffodils in the garden, carries them up to his hole, and then drops them. I have frequently noticed heads of these daffodils, which are of a very small kind, gathered and thrown down, and I have wondered who the destroyer could be. By chance I saw one morning, a starling alight on the ground near a clump of daffodils, run up to it, pluck off a flower as neatly as I could have cut it with scissors, and fly up to his nest. When I went out to watch his next proceedings, I found this blossom, and four others with it, lying on the path under the nesting-hole. The bird's action seems to be entirely aimless and wanton. No fresh and sappy vegetable material of any sort is ever used to line a nest, and a starling cannot eat a daffodil flower. Even Darwin—who had a stronger belief in the doctrine of sexual selec-

tion than is common among his followers at the present day—would hardly have suggested that the cock-bird, well aware of the beautiful contrast between his dark shining feathers and the yellow flower, bore it up in his beak, hoping thereby to add to his attractiveness in his brooding wife's eyes. Have we here some rudiment of the æsthetic instinct that causes bower-birds to collect all sorts of bright objects with which to decorate their arbours, and that in our own country seems to guide the long-tailed tit, gold-crest, and chaffinch, in the construction and embellishment of their nests?

VI

The inside of a cocoa-nut shell when freshly emptied by tits often looks very curious. The whole of the thin lining—the “peel” of the nut—is covered with the marks of their beaks, so that it appears to be grained or stamped with innumerable minute mottlings of brown and white. These mottlings are less pretty than the traces of birds' feet in sand or snow, but they are not without some of the attractiveness that those slender footprints possess. They are a visible sign of the presence of little fellow-creatures who live and work and struggle for their daily bread close beside us, and who yet are separated from us by a barrier that is none the less impenetrable because it has no physical existence. We cannot take hold of the birds and caress them and find a passage from their minds to our own; so we like to look at and

to handle the unconscious marks that they leave behind them—just as we like to study the autograph of some great man and to feel that by touching it we are brought nearer to him—and we are apt to regard with a sentimental interest the dints and imprints made by beaks and claws.

VII

It would not be easy to meet with two better examples of protective colouring than a basking adder and a squatting pheasant; in both cases the creatures' usual surroundings are imitated with extraordinary success. If the primitive pheasant developed its markings and colour-scheme in the woods of Colchis, before ever the Argonauts brought it to Europe from the banks of the Phasis, those classic woods must have provided it with an environment much like the environment that it finds in English coverts. It is hardly possible to detect the presence of a hen pheasant crouching on the ground under trees and brambles, except by seeing her chicks run to her; and if, after she has been marked, and her position carefully noted, the eye wanders to some other object, it is almost equally difficult to discover the motionless bird. Human beings—not having the advantage of protective colouration—are extremely conspicuous objects in a wood, and instinct teaches the mother-pheasant not to stretch a leg or ruffle a feather while such dangerous intruders are about. In the kind

of place which the breeding pheasant usually frequents, the earth is as a rule covered with dead leaves and fern, with pine-cones and their littered scales—stripped off by squirrels—with fir-needles and acorn-cups, and with other buff and brown and chestnut-coloured rubbish. The light, filtering through the trees, dapples and mottles and gilds all this medley of warm tones, and viewed against such a background, the dappled and mottled and gilded plumage of the pheasant is practically invisible.

An adder when it lies out in the sunshine, coils itself up into graceful folds and curves, and the dark zig-zag down its back is not seen as a long, patterned stripe, but as a group of fine, even markings. These markings bear—at a casual glance—a certain resemblance to the toothed lines of darkness between the segments of withered fronds of bracken; and it is on a couch of dry bracken that a newly-awakened adder loves best to lie and bask in the warm air. Stretched at full length on the open ground, an adder takes on the similitude of a dead stick; the pattern on its back becomes a narrow streak, broken up by the play of light and shade, and the stick seems to be stained with lichen or flecked with fragments of peeling bark. The colour of this snake—the only venomous reptile that Britain can boast—varies considerably in different individuals; the lightest specimens are a very pale sand-grey, and the darkest—at any rate the darkest that the ordinary observer comes across—are a warm dun. All alike are marked with the blackish chain—or vandyke—dorsal pattern. In late April and

May the beautiful adder is seen at its best ; " all winter thin," it has " cast on sunny bank its skin," and issued forth in new vesture, fresh and clean and shining. The cast skins may sometimes be found caught in a tangle of dry grass or heather, or under a furze-bush. These skins are exceedingly thin and fragile, but tough rather than brittle ; the wide, ventral scales are transparent as glass, and each one over-laps the one behind it, and it is by the grip on the ground of the overlapping edges, that the adder glides along. Just as the fingers of a glove are reversed when it is pulled carelessly off the hand, so the snakes' discarded skins are reversed, and from the tip of the nose to the tip of the tail they are turned neatly inside-out ; sometimes they are left whole, with only a slit down the back of the head, but more often they are torn into two or three portions. The distinctive zig-zag of the adder is always plainly to be traced even on the semi-transparent, empty skin ; a very slight examination, therefore, is enough to tell the finder whether any strip of left-off raiment that he comes across was worn by an adder or by a harmless grass-snake. The most interesting and curious part of the skin is the " mask " ; the covering of the face is, I think, always shed entire, even to the outer films of the lidless eyes. These films are exactly like the two circular, concave glasses of an old-fashioned pair of spectacles ; they are crystal-clear and highly polished, and are set firmly in the thin, finely-scaled integument. Immediately behind them comes the fork of the V which is the mark of Cain branded upon the serpent's forehead.

All the books agree in saying that the food of the adder consists largely of mice ; this being so, one understands how it is that adders abound in the New Forest and are fat and well-liking. Hundreds and thousands—and even millions—of wood-mice must live in every copse and enclosure. They rustle among the dead leaves, play hide and seek in the wood-piles, climb like little squirrels up and down the sticks and stems in the hedges and squeak and court and quarrel on every bank.

VIII

Under the influence of continued sunshine, the nut-trees in the Forest have put forth young shoots, and each morning the cows all make their way down from the Common—where the herbage is short and scanty—to feed on the tender leaves. The Copse is threaded through and through with cow-paths, trodden hard and bare by successive generations of cattle. These paths are scarcely wide enough for a man to walk in without brushing against the enclosing undergrowth with either shoulder, and the tracks go up hill and down dale and lead into ditches and over steep banks and barriers of fallen branches, though they avoid the worst pieces of bog-land and the thickest mazes of thorn and briar. Wherever a path is seen to run directly to the stream that traverses the wood, it is certain that a shallow ford will be found, by which—except in times of flood—the cattle can easily pass over. Cow follows cow in single file from one

favourite feeding-ground to another, and glimpses of red, white, and strawberry hides are constantly seen between the tree-trunks and bushes. Sometimes a heifer newly turned out on the Forest, will stray from the band of cows that it ought to run with, and lose itself among the winding paths and half-dry dykes; for want of any better guide, it will push along first one and then another of these ditches—wandering ever farther and farther afield—until at last it may sink into a slough of wet clay, and die miserably of hunger and exposure. Or a cow, heavily in-calf, and poor from winter starvation, will get “bogged,” and perhaps give birth while held fast in the ooze and mud, to a dead calf; if the unfortunate beast is found before life is extinct, it may be dragged out with pulleys and ropes and taken home in a cart and treated with traditional—and drastic—remedies; but when this is done, it usually succumbs to inflammation or lung trouble.

To any-one who knows the face of the country fairly well, and yet is not familiar with the speech of the foresters, it comes as a surprise to hear that so-and-so’s heifer is “bogged in the main lake,”—no pond which can by any possibility be described as a lake, being found within a radius of many miles. The “main lake,” it seems, is the Dark Water which runs through the woods and marshes and is nowhere more than five or six feet wide, while in many places it is narrow enough for a man to stride with ease from one bank to the other. All the little brooks and rivulets which flow into this—or any other—stream, are also lakes, and so too are the creeks

which run up from the sea. The use of provincial words is sometimes curiously local. In the particular district about which I am writing, the word "bunny,"—meaning a gully, chine, etc.—seems to be almost unknown. Scarcely three miles to the south-east, the innumerable runnels and dykes that drain the salt-marshes are invariably called "bunnies," and all along the coast a little farther to the west, every ravine or chine, or narrow outlet to a stream, is a "bunny." A farmer from the North—speaking of the system by which the marsh-drains are trapped, so that the fresh-water is allowed to run out and the sea-water is prevented from running in—said to me the other day: "There is a swing-flap at the mouth of every bunny; they all call them bunnies down here, we call them cloughs where I come from." "Clough" was pronounced in such a way as to rhyme with "bough."

IX

Most of us regard butterflies with a sentiment not unlike that which we feel towards migratory birds—a sentiment the same in kind, but differing widely in degree. Their appearance gives us pleasure, because it is a token of summer, and because they are little living things which share our delight in the sun and the flowers and the thousand warm scents of earth; in our imagination we endow them with a human appreciation of beauty and of brightness. Children of the sunlight that they

are, we sometimes almost allow ourselves to believe that they—like the swallows and the nightingales—are in truth pilgrims from some milder land, who visit us only in the noontide of the year. We forget that all the winter through, when bitter blasts are blowing and snow is falling, and the ponds are curdled into ice, in one form or another they are with us still. It is probable that many of our butterflies never wander far from the spot where, generation after generation, the eggs are laid, the larvæ reared, and the perfect insects hatched out. Some species (*e.g.*, hair-streaks) lay their eggs in the autumn, and the eggs remain dormant until the spring sunshine warms them to life. More commonly, the winter is passed in the larval state; while the rare swallow-tail, the large white, and a few other species, hibernate as chrysalids. The peacock and the brimstone are familiar examples of the butterflies whose habit it is to take their long rest when they have reached maturity. The survival of the race during cold weather must be provided for in one way or another, if it is not to perish from off the face of the earth.

X

The meadows and pastures over which the larks trill and hover are at the present moment golden with dandelions; they come before “the buttercups, the little children’s dower.” When the sun shines brightly, thousands of round, flat blossoms reflect the rays of light;

but in the afternoon every flower shuts itself up and goes to sleep, and the yellow fields grow green again. Dandelions have their uses. Old-fashioned folk think that no physic is so wholesome in the spring as a drink brewed from the roots; and when I am picking the leaves and bloom to tempt the sluggish appetite of my tortoise, I sometimes find other people collecting them for a different purpose. One day lately I saw a boy pulling up large quantities of dandelion tufts and stuffing them into a sack. I asked him what he was going to do with them, and he said that they were for "our horse, to make his coat shine—and they do make it shine too." Some country grooms believe that the eating of dandelions causes horses' coats to become dappled as well as glossy. Possibly the bitter juice of the plant is a tonic useful to both man and beast.

XI

How many of us have our walks spoiled, and half our pleasure in the country destroyed, by the sights we see and the sounds we hear! The quiet of a fair, calm day is broken by a continuous, distant barking; we follow the sound up and come upon a dog—generally a cross-bred lurcher, retriever, or sheep-dog—tied to an old tub or kennel in some farm-yard, or perhaps chained in a pig-sty at the far end of a cottage garden. The sun shines, the sweet wind blows—the summer scorches and the winter freezes—and the dog is still there, an

innocent prisoner sentenced to life-long confinement. It may think itself fortunate if by sitting on the roof of its sorry home, it can catch a glimpse of the passers-by and wile away a few moments of the long hours in watching their coming and their going. Even the excitement of the furious barking at some unknown wayfarer, and the wild plunge forward—checked by the strangling of the cruel chain which pulls the beast up short—must be better than the dreary monotony of eventless days passed in blank idleness. The twitching nostrils catch the scent of game, the scent of other dogs; the sharp ears hear all sorts of enticing sounds away across the fields; the dark eyes gaze out upon the world, waiting for that *something* for which the dumb, imprisoned spirit unconsciously craves; but nothing happens and no help comes—the footsteps of death itself, tarry, and will not hasten to set the captive free. Uncared-for and ill-fed, the neglected dog drags miserably through the space of time allotted for its sojourn on this earth, which its happier brethren find such a pleasant place of habitation; “it isn’t living, it’s only biding,” as a poor woman said, long ago, of her own restricted, toil-worn life—a life spent in doing hard, dull work in order to get food to eat, and in eating scanty, savourless food in order to get strength to work.

MAY

MAY

I

I WISH that I had skill to describe the great wood in May. The forest people call it "The Copse"—there is for them only one Copse—but this sounds to our ears, accustomed as they are to hearing the name "copse" bestowed on some poor little grove of hazels, a misnomer. Over acre after acre the oak-trees spread, climbing up hill and down dale, and they are belted about with broad tracts of dark Scotch firs. An undergrowth of old hollies hides the bases of the pine-trunks, and thickets of hawthorn everywhere shelter themselves beneath the branches of the oaks. To look through the dense foliage of the evergreen wood into the bare woods beyond, before the leaves have unfolded, is like looking out from a summer world into a world of frost. The sun may shine down with April warmth, but the hoary boles and pale grey traceries of interlacing boughs, stand out chill and wintry against the blue sky, and in the distance they seem to melt away into a mist of silver rime.

Suddenly, as the days go by, a change comes. On

night the heavens are opened and rain falls ; the morning brings a puff of south-west wind, the slumbering oaks awake from their long winter's rest and shake their branches, and on every twig and spray appear flecks of golden-green. The hour of awakening is not the same for all the trees. Here and there one is backward and another is forward, and naked limbs may jostle against limbs already fully clothed. Under the influence of "the jolly month of May," the fir trees rouse themselves no less surely than the oaks and the thorns, and from the middle of each tuft of blue-green needles a pointed boss pushes out and gleams scarlet in the evening light. And while buds are bursting and leaves expanding on the trees above, the magic of the spring is working another miracle on the ground below ; the clean sweet-smelling, autumn litter of dry needles, pine-cones, withered fern, and flakes of bark, is pierced through and thrust aside by ten thousand-thousand loops of bracken-stalk which heave up their arched backs and prepare the way for the uncurling of the tender fronds whose soft fingers would be sorely bruised if they were obliged to force a passage for themselves between the layers of their warm coverlet.

In the heart of the Copse, the Dark Water lies hidden. Living boughs and fallen trunks cast their shadows over the brown peat stream, but it comes into view again and again where it is crossed by grassy rides, and though the deeper pools may be dark as night, the pebbly shallows shine and glitter with a yellow radiance which is as cheerful as the limpid flow of the clearest chalk rivulets.

On every side the wood slopes to the winding bed of this water-way, and the main stream is fed by innumerable rills which run down through narrow channels cut deep in the tawny, ochreous earth. The hard-fern grows so luxuriantly on the edges of some of these rills that its ever-green fronds stretch across the current and touch the tips of the fronds held out to meet them from the opposite banks. With the sober *Blechnum* is mingled the fresh green of half-unfolded lady-fern, and vigorous growths of male fern lift up tall, immature fronds, each curved like the head of a Bishop's pastoral staff. The crowning glory of these Forest dykes is the wealth of lungwort which grows in every nook and hollow. Probably there is no other place in England where *Pulmonaria angustifolia* can be found in such abundance as in this wood and the tract of country which surrounds it; the blue of the large flowers—far brighter than the blue of any cultivated variety of the plant—is almost startling in its brilliance; and when the buds show, as they sometimes do, a gleam of intense crimson, the vividness of the patch of colour rising above a bed of moss and faded leaf and twig, is extraordinary.

The wettest of the woodland ditches possess other ornaments besides flower and fern and emerald moss. The slow water scarcely seems to move over thick drifts of sodden oak-leaves and fir-cones, and upon the cones and leaves grow little delicate fungi with orange caps and slender ivory-white stems. These fungi are rooted on the vegetable refuse, but they hold their bright heads erect above the mire and slough from

which they spring, and above the surface of the sluggish stream.

Although half a gale of wind may be blowing on the open Common outside, and the pine-tree tops may sway and strain and sigh and rustle, there is always shelter in the depths of the wood and bird and beast and reptile know this full well. It is on the gustiest days that the greatest number of living things may be found harbouring "in the *loo* of the Copse," as the woodlanders say. The warm rays of the sun can penetrate to spots from which the cold spring blast is completely shut out, and all the creatures seek these pleasant nooks. The jangle of cow-bells never ceases night or day. Now near, now far, the sound comes through the undergrowth, softened to a peculiar sweetness; and when the wearers of the bells are invisible, and the tinkle-tinkle is heard on every side, one almost imagines that one is listening to ghostly peals rung from the ghostly towers of old lost churches, long since forgotten and destroyed.

A trampling and cracking among the bushes heralds the coming of cattle or of ponies, or perhaps a donkey's shaggy brown head is thrust through a tangle of holly-boughs. All the beasts who live "on the forest"—it is always "on" and not "in" the forest that they are said to live—are only half-domesticated; they wander where they will—from Lyndhurst to Beaulieu, and from Beaulieu to Fawley—starving when food is scarce and the Commons are as bare as one's hand, and filling themselves in the lush, green days of June.

II

“The sparrow hath found her an house and the swallow a nest where she may lay her young,” sang the old Hebrew poet; and he went on to say that the house and nest were the sacred altar which he and his race regarded with profound veneration. If devout Jews really allowed birds the right of sanctuary in their Temples they were animated by a far more kindly spirit than that which rules the actions of parsons and churchwardens at the present day. A passion for tidiness and pharisaic cleanliness has driven out the protective, fatherly feeling that bade innocent lives welcome under the consecrated roof. Last week I visited a small country church in an out-of-the-way village, and saw among the rafters and ledges of the porch many remnants of disused nests. Over them all and right down to the walls and round the archway, a fine wire netting had recently been fixed. An impenetrable oak door shuts off the porch from the church itself, yet even this outer court must not be defiled by the presence of the most lovely and lovable beings which exist on the face of the earth—there is no longer any place for them in the building where the religion of love is preached. The zeal of the cleaner and reformer too often extends to the very belfry. Meddling officials order the removal of “rubbish,” and with the rubbish go the owls and the jackdaws whose ancestors have dwelt in security under the creaking weather-cock for

centuries. When all is made spick and span—the shutters painted and the cobwebs swept away—where are the swifts and swallows to build their nests? The children of the future will grow up with no memories of summer Sunday evenings when they sat beside their mothers in the old Church, while the scent of the lime-blossom came in through the open doors, swifts screamed round the tower, and swallows twittered on the porch.

III

The greatest glory of May-time in many gardens is a wealth of old-fashioned crimson peonies. One cannot have too many of these gay flowers; their full, glowing heads light up bed and border in a most satisfactory way. Few people seem either to grow or to know the fennel-leaved peony, although it has been in cultivation for a very long time. A clump of it is just now looking its best among my late tulips and purple and white irises. The blossoms are coloured a more brilliant red, and are borne more stiffly upright than those of the common variety; and the finely-cut leaves bear a close resemblance to the leaves of love-in-a-mist. Years ago I saw this plant mentioned in a gardener's catalogue and sent for it, and I have found it very robust, easily-grown, and free-flowering.

A blaze of peonies in bloom always reminds me of a story I used to hear about the destructiveness of a raven, which belonged to my grandfather in the early part of

last century. The bright, shining flowers of the peonies in his master's garden possessed an irresistible fascination for the bird. He knew perfectly well that he was not allowed to pull them to pieces, but the moment he thought that no eye was upon him he hopped quietly along the paths and attacked one crimson ball after another till all the ground was covered with the scattered petals. If this havoc was observed from the study window while it was in progress, the master descended with uplifted stick to drive away the evil-doer. But the raven was not to be scared, and was far too quick and nimble ever to let the stick touch him. He skipped and fluttered round and round, always taking care to keep just out of reach of the avenging arm. Hidden spectators enjoyed the sight of the two gentlemen in black—one clad in the glossiest of sable plumage, and the other in knee-breeches and buckled shoes—dancing about among the red litter of ruined blossoms. Our grandfathers, by the way, invariably pronounced the word "peony" so that it rhymed with "bryony."

IV

Most people who take any interest in trees and plants must have noticed of late years many unsightly marks on the leaves of hollies. These marks are particularly conspicuous at the present moment, as the old leaves have not yet fallen from the trees. Some bushes have

hardly a twig left unspoilt. A blister is raised under the skin of the leaf and a sinuous groove, like the track of a tiny worm, leads into this blister. The damage is caused by a small fly, *Phytomyza aquifolia*, which lays its eggs just beneath the skin. The grubs when they are hatched out feed on the inner substance of the leaves in which they find themselves, and the chrysalids are formed where we afterwards see the blisters. The appearance of many fine holly-trees has been completely ruined by this pest, and the fly seems to be increasing in numbers and the area of its ravages to be extending. One spring day I was sitting under a hedge on the grassy slope where the battle of Cheriton was fought. As I sat there, I watched two little blue tits going in and out among the glossy foliage of an old holly. Their beaks tapped so sharply upon the hard, polished surface of the leaves, that they made a perceptible noise like the strokes of a fairy hammer. When the birds had flown away I examined some of the leaves which they had attacked, and found the outer skin of all of them pierced in many places of tiny holes. Tits do not peck holly leaves either for their amusement or to eat the vegetable tissues of which they are composed. These busy birdlings must have discovered within the skin some almost microscopic animal substance. Very many of the old leaves on the tree had been damaged by the larvæ of the *Phytomyza*; why should it not have been the eggs out of which these pests hatch, which the tits were destroying?

V

Sweet-gale, golden-withy, bog-myrtle—call it what you will, all the names are alike delightful—affords as much gratification to the nostrils as to the eyes. The fragrance rising from the bloom is powerful and indescribable. It has often been remarked that there are no adjectives belonging exclusively to scents, and none which convey a correct impression of their nature and quality. If I say that the scent of sweet-gale is aromatic, warm, and slightly resinous, the words will mean little to those who do not already know what it is like. Brush through a wide expanse of blossomed gale, and you will carry away with you a sense of slumbrous intoxication—the odours of frankincense and myrrh will steal up into your brain with a soothing, enervating influence, and you will be ready to exclaim that you have found “the Lotos eaters’ lovely land.” So strong is the feeling of pleasant drowsiness produced by the flowering of the golden-withy, that the people who live where it covers all the damp tracts on the heath, believe that it is difficult to keep awake even in the day-time while it is in blossom ; if you take a piece into a closed room “you are bound to go to sleep,” they say.

The thought of the beds of sweet-gale recalls the sound by which a walk through them is accompanied—the “suck, suck” of one’s boot-heels, drawn with an effort at each step, from the yielding, marshy soil. Every portion of the wet land is cut and scored with footmarks ; there are few traces of boots, but the rounded hoofs of

ponies and the cloven hoofs of cattle have left their imprints all over the grass and earth and close-growing moss. Sometimes the hoofs sink so deep that the hollows which they make form miniature wells where water accumulates and stands for weeks together. I have seen a thirsty cattle-dog go and drink from one of these pools on a hot, dry day—and a little, fastidious griffon follow the great dog and drink after him, thinking that the water so eagerly sought by the big beast must be of special virtue or sweetness.

When the golden-withy is in flower, the creeping willow, which is its humble companion, is also in blossom. To anyone who is not well acquainted with the heath-country, the sight of willow "palms" creeping on the ground instead of crowning tall bushes, comes as a surprise. The size of the palms is in just proportion to the size of the dwarf shrub that bears them; and the tiny catkins, powdered with yellow pollen, are exceedingly pretty. About a month later than the time when the palms, the male flowers of the creeping-willow, are at their best, the seeded female flowers become, in their turn, conspicuous; fluffy balls of a white, silk-like substance are everywhere seen tangled in the grass or rising an inch or so above the matted growth of herbage.

VI

One of the strangest-looking plants in our flora, the common horse-tail, *Equisetum arvense*, is now appearing above the ground. There is something unnatural about

all cryptogams : they look as if they belonged, as indeed they do, to an earlier stage of the world's history. At present only the fertile stems of this *Equisetum* are to be seen ; the tall, sterile stalks with their long green "hairs," the "horse-tails," which come up later, are much more conspicuous and much better known. These spore-bearing, club-shaped growths that push their way through the hardest chalky river-banks and through the clod of undrained waste land, bear some resemblance at first sight to fungi. The dull, pink stems and brownish tessellated heads are, as we are apt to say, unwholesome-looking ; we always regard with suspicion any member of the vegetable kingdom which is not green. And, perhaps it is because these early, fruitful stalks are leafless, pallid, and dingy that horse-tails have been assigned by our ancestors, who fitted country name to country things, to the toad. They are "paddock-pipes," just as fungi are toadstools. Paddocks (toads) are supposed to fashion for themselves musical instruments out of the hollow stems. Let us hope that they sit upon their round one-legged stools when down in the moist ditches they produce their reedy melody :—

" The grisly toadstool grown there might I see,
And loathed paddocks lording on the same."

VII

Much has been written and related about the different materials used by birds in nest-building. We have all

heard of the bird that built its nest of watch-springs, and of other birds that have chosen to weave fragments of newspaper, and all sorts of strange odds and ends, into the substance of their nests. But it is the beauty, and not the eccentricity, of the materials employed, that usually strikes one when a nest is examined. How many nests I have this year found pulled out and thrown down, it is impossible for me to calculate—the number must be lamentably large; of these carefully-constructed cradles, reduced to ruins before the pretty purpose for which they were built was fulfilled, three were especially noteworthy. One of the three, a goldfinch's nest, now lies before me. It is only the inner cup that I have preserved; probably the more solid foundations were left behind in the bush from which the nest was torn. The whole substance of this cup—which measures two-and-a-half inches across—is matted thistle-down; it would be an interesting task, for anyone possessed of boundless patience, to pluck the little nest apart and count the heads of thistle-down used in the weaving. Here and there a feather is embedded in the vegetable down; one of these feathers is a most beautiful yellow and black "quill" dropped from the goldfinch's own wing. An exceedingly neat lining of horsehair finishes off the interior of the cup. It must have been hard work for the birds to find enough hairs to weld together into so smooth and fine a bed; they must have sought them diligently on posts and tree-trunks where horses, turned out to grass, were in the habit of rubbing themselves. Each hair is carried round and round the inside of the nest, and each is inter-

laced with the other hairs in such a manner that a fairly hard tug fails to loosen it. Black hairs and brown hairs and white hairs are woven into the fabric, but I do not see any contribution from the mane or tail of a chestnut horse. How many journeys were taken to fetch the thistle-down—how many minutes were spent in felting it together! What labour was involved in the collection of hairs for the lining—and what infinite pains were bestowed on their arrangement! And in the end the whole exquisite piece of workmanship was destroyed to gratify the mischievous humour of some thoughtless idler.

A second beautiful cradle that I saw torn out this season, was that of a long-tailed tit. Every portion of the exterior of this large, domed, nest was covered with silver-grey and greenish lichen. Mr. Dewar has put it on record that he once watched a pair of long-tails build and ornament a nest; it took the tiny birds three weeks to complete their task. It can have taken the destroyer scarcely three seconds to wreck the finished structure which I found rent asunder and thrown among some furze bushes.

I am not sure what manner of bird was the builder of the last ruined nest which I am going to describe; I came upon it lying on the ground in a wood, and it had neither lining nor any firm outer covering. A mere mass of moss and leaves, roughly formed into a round basin shape, this rudimentary nest would not have attracted attention had it not been for the condition of the leaves which were incorporated in it—every one was a “skeleton”

leaf. Years ago it used to be the fashion for ladies to waste a great deal of time in making skeleton leaves by a chemical process; these leaves when they were finished, were much too perfect in every detail, and looked much too artificial, to possess any charm. Nature does the work far better. Tough-fibred leaves drop into wet ditches and pools and lie and rot in the mud until only the mid-ribs and reticulated veinings are left entire; they thus become thin films of delicate, openwork tracery. It is the leaves of poplars which are most often *retted*—to use a technical term employed in the production of linen-fibre—in this way; but all the skeleton leaves in the torn nest were from oak-trees. The combination of fresh green moss and pale-brown, lace-like leaves, was exceedingly pretty.

VIII

It is small wonder that the Great Copse is live with Holly blues in the early part of May; the abundance of their caterpillars' food-plant, the common holly, must make the whole of this district an earthly paradise to these butterflies, especially in such a year as this, when many of the holly trees have been clothed with creamy white blossom as with a garment—for it is on the flowers, and not on the hard, prickly leaves, that the larvæ feed. The hollies, not content with forming a thick undergrowth in the Copse, wander out on to the borders of the wide heath which stretches away beyond it for miles and

miles, up to Lyndhurst itself ; and it is these outstanding trees that attain the largest size. The trunks frequently measure as much as two or three feet in circumference, and the finest individual tree that I have come across possesses a bole of such noble proportions that I have tried in vain to make my arms meet round it.

The Common has its own butterflies. The first to appear are the small Heaths, and they are followed by Grizzled-skipppers, Common-blues, and Small-coppers. The little Heaths swarm all over the open, furzy land ; they flutter and dance and are blown hither and thither by the sea-breeze which never entirely drops except on the stillest of still days. Sometimes when the wind is rough, all the tiny butterflies have much ado to anchor themselves to grass or flower ; they ride up and down on swaying heads of white cotton-grass, and cling to the pink lousewort and creeping tormentil, and seem to make of their very troubles and mishaps, a frolic. But should an unfortunate insect drift within reach of the carnivorous sundew, tragedy of the most terrible description awaits it. The sundew lifts up its pretty, rounded leaves in the bright noonday light ; they are edged with scarlet and fringed with diamond-beaded hairs, and they look as innocent as clusters of twinkling dewdrops. Every bead is, however, a snare set for the undoing of some wretched wanderer. The clear "dew," cruel as the detested bird-lime, adheres to whatever strikes against it, and any small creature, once caught, is for ever unable to detach itself from the leaf ; there it remains, its juices sucked and digested by the vegetable spider, until its

body shrivels up. I have taken dead and living butterflies from the sundew's trap ; sometimes they are caught by the feet and sometimes by the wings, and occasionally a miserable Heath or Grizzled-skipper may be found held back downwards with its helpless legs kicking in the air. Probably the *Drosera* has no wish—it is impossible to avoid speaking of this plant as though it were a sentient being—to entrap butterflies ; their dry wings are of no use to it, and they sometimes actually prevent the nutritious bodies of the captives from coming in contact with the sucking glands. But, having spread the snare, the ogre is powerless to release any insect that flies or walks into it, whether its capture is desired or not.

When the various heath-haunting butterflies are first on the wing, the species that reigns supreme in the woods is the larger Pearl-bordered Fritillary. As in the case of the Holly-blue, its abundance is accounted for by the abundance of the food-plant on which its larvæ are reared—the dog-violet. The Copse is full of dog-violets ; not only of the common early blue violet, but also of *Viola lactea*, the pale-flowered species—or as some botanists would say, merely variety—which goes on blooming long after the other kinds are over. Well on into June the pallid blossoms still appear held erect on their long stalks above the narrow, pointed leaves. Out on the Common, many of the flowers of *Viola lactea*, are almost white, and even in the shelter of the woods they never take on the bright tints of the cheerful, pansy-faced violet that is associated with primroses and anemones and tender green mos-

chatell. Even the purple and white sweet violets which have so great a charm of their own are without some of the attractiveness of the early dog-violet; in striving after more conspicuous colouring, and the allurements of scent, they have lost the delicate rays that diverge from the eye of the humbler blossoms and are said to have been acquired for the purpose of guiding fertilizing insects to the honey store.

The Pearl-bordered Fritillary seems to have a great liking for the nectar offered to it by the common bugle. Half-a-dozen stems of bugle growing side by side, will sometimes each support a beautiful orange-brown, black-spotted guest on its head of lilac blossoms. As a rule the Fritillary's wings are opened wide and held flat on the flower, after the fashion of the wings of a pictured butterfly in a book, but now and then they are raised and brought together above its back, and then the ornaments which have given the creature its pretty name, may be well seen; the hind wings are each bordered on the underside with seven silver spots that gleam like pearls. The flowers of the bugle fade before the Pearl-bordered Fritillary's season is over, and when there is no more bugle-honey to be had, the butterfly haunts the purple heads of the meadow-thistle. No handsomer wild-flower grows in our fields and woods than this meadow-thistle, *Carduus pratensis*, and yet comparatively few people appear to have ever noticed it or to be aware of its existence. The discs of crimson-purple florets are borne singly on long, silver-green stalks, and the narrow, flat leaves are lined with a silvery film. Early in June countless tracts

of marshy land are starred with these bright flowers ; were they rare exotics imported with difficulty from some foreign land, all the world would unite in admiring them.

IX

The Hampshire peasant does not often attempt to be witty ; but here is a story told by a forester with many chuckles : “ A man came along from somewhere up the country to work on the Forest. It was the spring of the year when he started ditching, and the snipe were bleating pretty well all day. He kept on for some time and didn't say nothing, and then he stopped and asked what that bleating noise was that he could hear ; he couldn't see any sheep or anything, but there was the bleating plain enough. The men that were working with him told him that they were surprised to think he had never heard of the flying Nanny-goats that lived in the Forest, there were plenty of them thereabouts. He sort of drew back, and said he thought he'd better clear out, such things didn't seem natural ; and that was the last that was ever seen of him in these parts.”

X

The other day I came upon a little boy sitting on a door-step in a narrow street blowing soap-bubbles. It

seemed to me as I watched him, that it was long since I had seen any bubble-blowing, and I have since wondered whether the pastime has really gone out of fashion ; it is a pity if an amusement so pretty and so charming is neglected by children of the present day. Fifty years ago, a still, mild day used to send one flying with pennies in one's hand to the old bow-windowed Inn to buy clay pipes. No pipes ever survived from one bubble-blowing to the next, and the stems of the new ones had to be broken to exactly the right length, and made smooth with edgings of red sealing-wax, before the mixing and testing and " making the pot boil over "—that is, holding the pipe-bowls under the surface of the soapy water and blowing vigorously—could begin. Then trial bubbles, which burst quickly, were tossed into the air, and were followed by others and yet others, until at last, large, perfect globes floated upwards and wrecked themselves against the branches of the trees, or were carried almost to the house-eaves. Rival bubbles flew aerial races, and those that sank too swiftly to the ground sometimes rested for awhile upon the grass before they broke, and bending over them one could watch the kaleidoscopic changing of the colours, and the unceasing movement in the marvellously thin substance of the transparent film. But the soap-bubble's brief moment of glory was when its glassy curves caught the sunlight as it soared aloft, and the faint iridescence of blue, green, rose, and purple, melted into rings and streaks of gold.

JUNE

JUNE

I

LAST night I heard the clamour of the stone-curlews for the first time this season. I doubt whether any sound is more welcome to the ears of the bird-lover, than the call of these mysterious hermits of the wolds. In the dead calm of the night a faint whistle is heard; it comes nearer and nearer, and grows louder and more clear, and soon the peculiar character of the cry is plainly distinguished. Each note is double—a whistle which seems to return upon itself, as it were, with a musical squeak. It is, I think, never possible even on a bright moonlight night, to discern the forms of the whistlers, great birds though they are, and doubtless they pass over the town at a considerable height. Flying birds are always difficult to see in a poor light; again and again I have stood at nine or ten o'clock on an open common, when the moon was shining in a clear sky, and listened to snipe drumming all round me, and I have invariably failed to catch a glimpse of one of them, though the distinctness of the sound proved that they were swerving and dipping close overhead. Years

ago, stone-curlews were heard much oftener at midnight by wakeful citizens of Winchester than they are now, and it is feared that they have abandoned—or almost abandoned—some of their old breeding-places on the high downs. The birds held these hill-fortresses before ever the primitive inhabitants of Britain threw up the earth-works of Winklebury Camp or Tidbury Ring, and it is lamentable to think that the present generation may possibly see their final banishment from the land of which they are, by virtue of long possession, the rightful owners. The stone-curlew, or Great plover, is one of the shyest of creatures, and cannot endure the advance of civilisation and the too near neighbourhood of man; bare, stony ground, not worth the trouble of ploughing, suits him exactly for the rearing of his young ones, and he much prefers that no human eye should watch his doings.

II

No one who has not tried it knows the enjoyment and satisfaction to be derived from an early ride or walk on a summer morning. Too often the country is spoilt for us by the artificial life, the artificial people, the conventional clothes and the conventional manners which everywhere make themselves heard, seen and felt. All this wearisome turmoil and chilling constraint is invisible and unknown before seven o'clock in the morning. We ourselves are no longer strangers in a strange land.

The fragrant, fertile, soil, the wood and the river, at last belong as naturally and rightly to us as they do to the hare and to the weasel, to the water-vole and the twilight owl. It is very rarely that we are able to grasp for a moment in the busy glare of mid-day this feeling—the most perfect and exhilarating that life can offer us—of being no longer intruders on bird and beast and fish and flower, but a true and honest part of the nature by which we are surrounded.

The men and women that we meet in the early morning are not out of keeping with the spirit of the summer dawn. Labourers trudging to work in the fields, dairy-men calling the cows across the dewy meadows, or gardeners moving among their blue-green cabbages and scarlet-blossomed runnerbeans, all are clad in homely, weatherstained garments that hang on them as easily as a rabbit's coat covers its back—seemly clothes that rest the eye and are worn to protect the wearer from rain and sun, and not to make a vain and useless show. The influence of the hour inspires a kindly sense of fellowship, that is almost unknown later in the day. No one dreams of passing the wayfarer without a pleasant "good-morning" and a word or two about the weather.

III

There are no British birds more fascinating than the house-martins. They twitter under our eaves and flirt and chatter through the sunny afternoons as if they had

not a care or trouble in the world, and yet few birds have less reason to be light-hearted. Over the seas they come each spring to lay their eggs and rear their broods in the well-remembered places where they themselves were born. Perhaps they find on their arrival inclement weather, a scarcity of gnats, cold nights, and beating winds. Nothing daunted by these adverse circumstances, they have no sooner settled into their summer quarters than they begin to build their nests. And what hard work that nest-building must be! Each fragment of wet mud is brought separately in their tiny black beaks and fixed to the walls of the house which they choose for their home. When the nest is with infinite labour finished, what happens? Too often, a loud-voiced blustering Ahab of a sparrow—with ivy, rafters, stack-pipes, and gutters all at his disposal—turns the little peaceable Naboth out of his few inches of freehold, and rears his own quarrelsome offspring in the nursery meant for babies of gentler birth. “What a chaviss those birds do make,” says a member of my household, when the insolent land-grabbers have been chirping, scolding, disputing and swearing from three o’clock in the morning till eight at night. The fragile, inverted mud huts are not intended to bear the weight of four or five over-fed young sparrows, or to withstand the vigorous movements of their rough parents, and I do not think that the stolen and maltreated nests often last through the winter following their annexation. Anyone can tell at a glance whether a nest is tenanted by its proper owners or by the usurpers; for if the martins

are in it, it is always kept perfectly neat and tidy, whereas if it is occupied by "the bird which the Hebrews call Tchirp," wisps of straw, fragments of dirty paper, or large feathers, are sure to be seen protruding from the aperture at the top. Should the martins be lucky enough to be left unmolested by sparrows, their safety is, unfortunately, not therefore assured. People are to be found with hearts so hard that they do not scruple to knock down the little dwellings which have been erected with such patience; their reason for destroying them being that they are afraid that their windows, walls or yards may be defiled by a few bird-droppings. Rather would I that my whole house was as thickly coated with guano as is a sea-fowl "rookery," than that one martin should find that when she trusted me with her home and her all she trusted me in vain.

IV

There are in the bird lover's life, red-letter days and red-letter hours which may never be forgotten. Such a day and such an hour was the hot noontide when the Dartford Warbler first showed itself to me. It shall not be told, or hinted, where the spot was—North, South, East or West—that this rare and delightful bird chose for its appearing. I was walking through thick furze-brakes when a new bird-note—sharp and angry, yet plaintive—rang out quite near me, and there on the top of a prickly bush I saw the little furze-wren. Scarcely

had I discovered her—I suppose it was the hen—when I put up her two young ones from their lurking-place among the low branches of the furze, and as they were not old enough to fly away, their mother would not leave them, but remained close at hand and afforded me an excellent opportunity of watching her every movement and studying every detail of her plumage. At first she looked soot-black all over, and the most striking thing about her appeared to be the length of her tail, which she held erect, wren-fashion. Soon one had time to notice the chestnut-brown of the bird's breast, her long, dull-yellow legs, and the brilliance of her large red-gold eye. The eyes of the Dartford Warbler are even more remarkable, as regards both size and colour, than one was prepared, after reading many descriptions, to find them; it is no exaggeration to say that they burn and glitter like living jewels set in the tiny, crested head. In a note made immediately after watching this warbler, I wrote—"the eye is actually conspicuous at a distance owing to its brightness." As long as I stayed near the spot, the mother-bird continued to flit from twig to twig—almost invariably alighting on the summit of a bush—and to scold me with parted beak and crest-feathers raised till they stood on end. The scolding cry is distinct and peculiar; each time it is uttered it begins in a sharp, high tone, and then drops to a lower, softer note. The fledgelings were lighter in colour than their parents; their immature plumage seemed to be a very dark rufous-brown all over—a brown not unlike the brown of a dark hen blackbird.

V

Where the coverts meet the moor there is often a belt of debateable ground which is neither common nor wood. The common runs in bays and inlets into the wood, and the wood extends in promontories and islets into the common. Under the shade of the trees the heather grows; and out among the bare heather stand isolated oaks and hawthorns and little thickets of birch, elder and willow. Sometimes the thorns are clothed from root to topmost branch with honeysuckle and are crowned at midsummer by pale masses of fragrant blossom. Broad alleys of fine turf open out between the clumps of bush and bracken and surround the patches of tall, strong-growing heath. The light-green grass in these alleys remains damp and soft at all seasons of the year, and the tract of debateable ground is the home of innumerable rabbits and peewits. The little beasts nibble the short turf, and the fowls of the air lay their blotched eggs where the ground is broken and covered with roots of coarser herbage. One wonders how it is that every egg is not stepped upon and destroyed by the ponies who wander all day long about the moors and are particularly fond of seeking shade on the outskirts of the woods. Walking one morning away from the trodden paths (and, as usual, getting bogged and having to retrace my steps), I saw performed, and played a part in, an interesting and delightful little drama. A lapwing started up from almost under my feet and flew to and fro in front of me

crying piteously, and at the same moment something small scuttled across the open grass and disappeared behind a heathy mound. I knew it must be a baby lapwing too young to fly, and that it must have concealed itself close to where I stood; but when I walked round the sheltering growth of heather, it was some time before I could discover anything alive. At last I detected a motionless object crouched on the grass in the shadow of the taller vegetation; the fledgeling squatted there still as a stone, its chin flat on the ground and its body drawn into as small a compass as possible. Swaying above my head, in an agony of apprehension, the mother called out to it instructions which it well understood and implicitly obeyed. As long as I stood looking at the little bird it remained still and stiff without the tremour of a feather; and when at last I moved away the tone of distress in the parent's cries became less acute, and she soon dropped down near her young one—to reward it, I hope, in some way for the heroic obedience which she doubtless thought had saved its life in the hour of peril.

The thing that was particularly worthy of note in the scene I have described, was the resemblance between the colour of the back and head of the young plover—the only parts of it which were exposed—and the colour of its surroundings. If there is—as there certainly is,—such a thing as protective colouring, here was one of the best examples of it I have ever seen. The clump of heather was purple-brown, the grass green, and the shadows in which the plover crouched were purple-green. The immature plumage on the bird's head and back was a brownish-purple

shot and flecked with green, and this colouring rendered it all but invisible in the position in which it placed itself.

VI

The longest day—the high noon of the year—and a day of fitful sunshine and hurrying clouds and soft west wind. Everywhere, the scent of mown hay and hot charlock-fields and all manner of growing things—elder-flowers and privet, dog-roses and blossomed grass. The green valley of the Test lies fresh and smiling under a summer sky, and how can the hours be better spent than in following the river until it becomes a narrow stream, and the stream until it becomes a trickling brook crossed by stepping-stones and choked with water-crowfoot and dark-leaved cresses.

The empty, white road—with scarcely so much as a farm-cart upon it—winds along between low hills and sloping woods, now passing over an old timbered bridge, and now over a bridge stained grey and orange with lichen and held up by round brick arches. Scattered farm-buildings stand back among the fields and hedge-rows and where the shingled spire of a low roofed Church rises close beside the highway, thatched cottages and creeper-covered shops and houses draw together into a village street. Wicket-gates open on to gardens filled with snap-dragons, canterbury-bells and tiger-lilies, and tufts of yellow-flowered corydalis find foot-hold in

crevices of the rough stone walls. No one can pass through this district without thinking of Cobbett and his *Rural Rides* and his farmer friend who was always ready to provide him with "excellent free-quarters." "The lands," he wrote, "are pretty beyond description. These chains of hills make, below them, an endless number of lower hills, of varying shapes and sizes and aspects . . . while the surface presents, in the size and form of the fields, in the woods, the hedge-rows, the sainfoin, the young wheat, the turnips, the tares, the fallows, the sheep-folds and the flocks . . . that, which I, at any rate, could look at with pleasure for ever." Probably no part of Hampshire has changed so little since Cobbett's days, as this remote valley where the tourist seldom comes, and where every by-path which branches from the main road mounts upwards, to lose itself eventually among the high chalk downs.

Gradually the character of the country alters. The last wet ditch fed by hidden springs is left behind, and the steep inclines grow steeper. Broad grass tracks on either side of the road meet upland fields, and the great ridge of hills which an hour ago was only a dim grey line upon the horizon, darkens and comes nearer, till the wind-swept juniper bushes that dot the bare escarpment are plainly to be seen, and, lifted high above all else, the single post of a gibbet. Fifteen or twenty houses lie clustered loosely together in the bottom of a vast *enton-noir*, and a little lonely Church, half-hidden by unkempt trees and hedges, stands slightly raised above them. Behind the church is a desolate manor-house with an

old walled garden whose secrets are securely screened from inquisitive eyes. This is all there is of the village of Coombe ; lost to the world, it sleeps forgotten in a deep hollow of the downs, and is a fitting scene for the many tales and traditions concerning it which have been handed down from generation to generation.

Precipitous lanes shut in by straggling hedges of cornel, wayfaring-tree and blackthorn, lead on to other villages, and in these lanes the heat is great in the early afternoon of the long June day. Fields of green wheat—so steep that ploughing must be cruel work for the horses—climb the hill on either hand, and here and there the dazzling red of poppies drowns the deep emerald of the corn. A broad patch of vivid blue, and again a smaller one, provide an unusual note of colour for a Hampshire wheat-field ; it is only in this high-lying corner of the land that wild cornflowers may be seen growing in masses and staining the fields with ultramarine-blue, as poppies stain them with scarlet. Big purple thistles nod beside the road, their broad discs borne on the summit of tall, silver-green stalks thick-set with spikes. Suddenly seven or eight turtle doves fly up from the corn ; the birds have found some food they like among the growing stems, and are met together in a little company to enjoy it. As they rise, their fanned tails show a delicate border of black and white markings and their small heads are carried erect. A kestrel who is hovering above a stretch of turf, holds his head in a very different fashion ; it is almost sunk between his shoulders, and his keen eyes are fixed on the ground far beneath him. Sometimes he

sways with the wind, his outstretched wings held rigid and motionless, and sometimes he suspends himself—stands still in the air, as it were—over one spot, and maintains his position by a rapid beating of his pinions.

Down, down into a deep trough among the hills, and a long pull up again to the top of yet another spur of the great North Downs. Away on the left, looking south-east, a wonderful view opens out. Miles and miles of varied country lie displayed as on a map far below, and in the dim distance the faint outline of the south downs melts into a haze. Chesford Head, nineteen miles off as the crow flies, stands up conspicuously, crowned with the familiar grove of beeches which serves as a landmark for half a county. From the salt marshes behind Calshot Spit, seventeen miles away in the opposite direction, the same high crest is plainly seen, and looking at it—and considering that it is also visible from points as far as apart as Butser Hill and Pitt Down—it is easy to understand how important a semaphore station the hill must have been in old days.

As the long hours of the long day have sped by, the sky has cleared, and the sun is moving northwards through a cloudless west. Golden lights and purple shadows are reflected in the river where it widens again at the foot of the valley, and flows quickly past hay-scented meadows. Willows sway their grey-green branches in the breeze; and when a sudden gust blows all the leaves sideways, they quiver into points of silver. Swallows stoop low over the water, and high in the air swifts chase each other screaming, or, sweeping downwards, slip under

the eaves of some old thatched roof where they and their ancestors have nested for untold years. Midsummer would not be midsummer, without the screaming of the swifts, the chattering and scolding of the sedge-warblers in the reeds, and—when evening falls—the stately flight of the stag-beetle. Before the last swift has vanished from the sky, the bats come out and hunt their winged prey; the eye can scarcely follow their quick twistings and doublings as they flit round the circuit they have chosen for their beat. And so the longest day passes into the shortest night, and all night long the light of the sun will linger on the north-west horizon.

VII

Even in this season of joy and plenty many misfortunes overtake the birds. A lamentable accident has lately happened in my own garden. A hen blackbird managed to entangle herself in some threads which were put up to keep the sparrows from a row of green peas. As soon as she was found, the threads were carefully cut from her claws and feathers, and she was released. For some reason she could not fly, and she ran about the paths looking ragged and miserable. When I first saw her, an hour or two after the accident, she was cowering in a corner, and I easily captured her. Neither wings nor legs were broken, and what hurt she had suffered it was difficult to say. The cock bird was distressed beyond measure; he called to her incessantly, fed her,

and fluttered about encouraging her to try to fly. It was all to no purpose ; she could do nothing but shuffle from one hiding-place to another. Presently, a hen blackbird from a neighbouring garden spied her, and dashing down, attacked her savagely. The cock hastened to his mate's defence, and drove the vicious assailant away. From time to time the attack was repeated ; the feeble victim growing ever feebler, and the male bird more furious. It was impossible to help in any way ; to interfere would have only been to add another terror to the miseries of the injured hen. At length night fell, and all the birds were quiet. Some days later a battered body was found under a heap of guttering which had lain in a corner awaiting the coming of the builder. Never again will protecting threads be woven across seed-beds in my garden.

But it would be better to make the kitchen plot a maze of network—turning it into the semblance of a gigantic spider's web—and trust to the birds' good angels guiding them safely over the danger, than to attempt to scare intruders by hanging up the corpse of an owl. Such a corpse I saw dangling from a stick among some young vegetables in a garden at Chandler's Ford the other day. There was something horribly human about the way its round head drooped forward on its breast as it swung from its gallows. Nothing looks so dead as a dead bird. A dead toad, a dead mole, a dead tortoise, does not strike one as being painfully dead. Chained to the earth and moving slowly such creatures never seem to be vividly and exultantly alive, and when they cease to breathe we notice

no such difference as that which is apparent when the little spark of life dies out of a bird. A dead swift is the most pathetically dead object that one can see. The idea of a swift which exists in our minds is an embodiment of vigorous life and untrammelled movement, of boundless freedom and tireless energy. Take away the energy and movement and life, and the swift ceases to be a swift, and becomes a little handful of soot-brown feathers and inert flesh which we would rather not look at—so melancholy is the contrast between life and death. This is what makes the sight of a bird's body hung up as a scare-crow, in humiliation and indignity, peculiarly detestable to many of us.

VIII

Old tomb-stones are during the summer much used by fly-catchers as stations from which to hawk their prey ; and there is little wonder that many birds choose grave-yards for hunting-grounds, for of all places they seem to attract the largest swarms of dancing gnats and flies. Gnats hang in clouds above damp grass much more than above earth or gravel—as everyone who sits in a garden on warm evenings is well aware—and the grass upon and around graves is often long and dank. The first fledgeling cuckoo that I ever had the luck to come across was in, or rather on, a robin's nest which was tucked into the grass at the foot of an old grey tomb-stone. The big bird had outgrown its nursery and trodden it flat, and

when I saw it, it was sitting with its back against the stone, defying the world. Swifts never seem to scream with so much vigour and abandonment of delight as in their mad flight round the tower of some village church; and round the Churches, too, swallows and martins circle and wheel.

That birds have learnt in many villages to look upon the Churchyards as sanctuaries where they may live and love and nest and rear their broods in safety, is as it should be. An old country Churchyard, unmarred by the hand of the civiliser and restorer, is the very home of peace and of all "tender, gracious, reverential thoughts;" it is ground consecrated by the tears and prayers of generations of toiling, sinning, and sorrowing men and women, more surely than by any words spoken over it in past days by priest or bishop. Turtle-doves crooning among the berried ivy, gentle thrushes warming their speckled eggs in the shadow of the yew, grey-headed jackdaws and twilight owls, are not less in keeping with the spirit of the scene than the robin who sings a Requiem above some lowly grave where the mould is freshly dug and a few rough sods mark out six narrow feet of earth—the heritage in store for every son of man.

One Churchyard I have known that was perfect in its remoteness and its air of age-long quiet; undisturbed and unvexed by the jar and wrangle of the changing world, this peaceful spot offered rest and refreshment to the tired eye and the tired mind. A steep lane shut in by high hedges, leads up to the little church with its shingled spire and its noble guardian yew. Green graves

cluster round the weatherstained walls, and between the graves strips of unmown turf used to show the gold and silver of wild flowers mixed with plumes of blossomed grass. The spell was broken ; a sudden zeal for " improvement " and " decent order " seized upon the authorities, and all became smooth and neat and new—as smooth and new, as glaring and unreverend, as the public gardens of some mushroom watering place ; the visitor who had come to pray might have been forgiven if he had remained to scoff. The " cold Hic Jacets of the dead," were outraged by the close proximity of hot red geraniums and exotic begonias, and the clipped and shaven grass seemed more suggestive of bowls and tennis than of eternal repose. As the years pass by and old friends and old faces pass away, an entire village often changes as completely as any of the households in it. New cottages are built and old ones are razed to the ground, stately elms and oak-trees are cut down, and hedges and rough palings give place to walls and iron fences. To the country folk, who have perhaps spent their whole lives in the one hamlet, everything comes in course of time to wear a strange and unfriendly aspect—their house is left unto them desolate. Have not these people a right to expect that when all else that has meant " home " to them has vanished, devoured by the hurrying years, their one last home, this little plot of ground where they have laid their dead, shall be suffered to remain as they knew it in their childhood ?

A pretty fashion that was often followed in days gone by in country Churchyards, appears to have been entirely

abandoned of late years ; I mean the fashion of binding grassy mounds with willow-rods. After the long pillow-shaped mounds had been formed above new graves, the fresh-cut turf was put back on them and kept in place by hoops made out of willow-wands. The ends of these hoops were thrust deep into the ground on either side of the grave ; and, where the soil was kindly, the rods took root and sprouted and covered the mounds with little bowers of greenery.

JULY

JULY

I

THE section devoted to linnets in a hand book of British birds opens with this sentence :—" Next to the goldfinch the linnet is most sought after in this country as a cage bird." I do not know any more melancholy or more vexatious words to read. A bird in a cage is always a pitiful and a dreary object. Even if the little, restless creature hopping continually from perch to perch, up and down and backwards and forwards, were only an automaton, a mechanical toy, the fidgeting sound of its meaningless activity, and the perpetual, restricted motion, would be wearisome to a degree. But when one considers that within the feathery form is imprisoned a sentient soul, spirit, mind—call it what you will—which is for ever craving to be off and away, which is capable of experiencing a mad rapture in the exercise of its powers of flight and song and a passion of joy in the wooing and wedding of its mate, and that this imprisoned spirit is so constituted that it is not capable of taking pleasure in any pastimes other than these from which it is relentlessly debarred,

then the sight of a bird in a cage becomes something more than annoying and irritating, it is a sight that may well fill us with a just anger and a profound sadness.

“ Tak any brid, and put him in a cage
And do al thin entent, and thy corrage
To foster it tenderly with mete and drynk
And with alle the deyntees thou canst think,
And keep it al so kyndly as thou may ;
Although his cage of gold be never so gay,
Yit hath this brid, by twenty thousand fold,
Lever be in the forest, wyld and cold,
Gon ete wormes, and such wrecchidness,
For ever this brid wil doon his busynes
To scrape out of his cage when he may ;
His liberate the brid desireth aye.”

So said Chaucer ; and still, five hundred years later, it is necessary to preach the same truths, and still men's hearts are so hard that they will not listen to them.

It is peculiarly senseless to shut up a linnet. A bird is desired, I suppose, for the beauty of its plumage and of its song. When you have got your linnet and locked the door upon it, you find that the loveliness of both song and plumage have eluded you. With the approach of winter the crimson fades from head and breast never to be renewed, and in the spring the plain brown bird warbles a melody from which the wild sweetness has departed. The great charm of a linnet's song lies in the series of liquid, incomparable notes that it utters most

frequently on the wing : “ sweet, sweet, sweet, piercing sweet ” as the music of the “ great god Pan.” There is no bird sound quite so enchanting. But it is a sound that belongs to wide spaces of furze-clad common and to the hedge-row oaks that stretch their limbs over fragrant clover-fields—not to prison-bars, brick walls, and stifling houses.

II

Best of all clouds are those that fore-tell a heavy thunderstorm ; thunder-heads, the country people call them. They rear themselves up in giant shape against the blue, and all their edges are strangely rounded and their swelling outlines are big with the storm that they are about to bring forth. The sun, which they will so soon eclipse, shines on them and makes their darkness darker ; and as they mount higher, their leaden hue turns to a deep purple, and the distant woods and hills are stained with indigo, while the trees close at hand stand out a vivid green. Suddenly a low rumble is heard away among the downs, then a bright flash almost blinds one, a loud clap follows on its heels, and the heavens are opened and the floods descend.

It is curious how little notice wild creatures appear to take of a storm—unless it is of extraordinary violence. The other day I watched the birds by the river when the rain was coming down in such torrents that the whole surface of the water was fretted and roughened, and the

drops that rose up continuously from the heavy splashing were indistinguishable from the drops that fell. The sand-martins never ceased their hawking, but rather gathered in increasing numbers until the eye was confused with trying to follow their rapid flight. They skimmed low over the stream and circled round and round, and with them were swallows—more swallows than I had seen at any other time this year—who stooped again and again and touched the water with their beaks. Great quantities of some fly beloved of fish and bird must have been on the wing; for while the rain fell faster and faster, and the birds wheeled and dipped more and more madly, a big trout rose and showed all his silver belly in a shining curve before he flopped back into the river. Out beyond the widening ripples which the trout set moving, a water-rat sped through the miniature waves made by the beating down of the thunder-shower, and took shelter under the bank; and beyond the path of the rat, five or six dabchicks floated and dived as unconcernedly as if the sun had been shining and the air untroubled by storm or rain.

Watching the flying birds—swallows and sand-martins—it seemed extraordinary that the feathers in their wings did not become clogged and heavy with the drenching moisture; the drops evidently rolled off them “like water off a duck’s back”; had it been otherwise they must have fallen into the stream or struggled with difficulty to some resting-place on land. The structure of feathers is peculiarly moisture resisting, and there is also a certain dry oiliness, if one may use such an

expression, about birds' plumage. Occasionally one sees a thrush or robin emerge from its bath so wet that it is impossible for it to fly ; but a bird when it washes itself, deliberately fluffs out all its feathers and lets the water run in under them and saturate them—not that it likes the soaking, but it likes to feel the cold water touch its irritable skin, and it likes to be clean ; a bird flying on the other hand, keeps its feathers in such a position—closely over-lying one another—that they form a surface impenetrable to any ordinary drops of rain.

III

The human inhabitants of the more remote parts of the New Forest are as interesting as the other living creatures that are found within its borders. Distance from a railway and from any large centre of population, and a strong attachment to the soil which has bred and fed their ancestors for untold generations, make them curiously unlike the dwellers in towns. Their vices and virtues are more primitive, their outlook on life more simple, their characters more individual—in a word, they are more “picturesque,” body and mind—than their fellow men who are pent up in the streets and lanes of cities. The conversation of a true, unspoilt forester is almost always racy ; his vocabulary contains many telling, unfamiliar words, and the way he turns his sentences sounds fresh and forcible to ears used to the constant repetition of stale and conventional phrases.

Unfortunately, the better educated of the people are aware that their manner of talking, when they are at their ease and carried away by the interest of their subject, is apt to strike a stranger as unusual, and they are ashamed of their homely speech. One must live with them for some time before the words which one wants to hear slip out unconsciously ; and, even when one hopes that shyness and best manners are forgotten, if the flow of conversation is rashly interrupted by a question as to the meaning of some expression, there comes the instant apology, " Oh, I beg your pardon for speaking so broad, I wasn't thinking who I was talking to." According to Wise, who wrote his book on the New Forest, seventy years ago, some of the words and phrases in ordinary use are, and always have been, peculiar to the district ; others no doubt were once heard commonly all over the South of England, but have now become obsolete in more thickly populated parts of the country.

The word " charm " is often used by Hampshire folk to describe a confused medley of sounds ; but it is certainly more frequently employed in this sense in the Forest, than elsewhere. The thing described need not be what we should call " charming," it may, indeed, be very much the reverse. For instance, a forester's wife when telling me how a neighbouring farmer half-starved his sheep last winter, said the noise they made all day from sunrise onwards, " was a fair charm." If the hedges are full of whitethroats, chaffinches, robins, and dunnocks, singing their hearts out, the " birds are all of

a charm right along the lane," and the croaking frogs in a pond are "quite a charm." When "the charm of the cow-bells" is spoken of, the speaker does not intend any allusion to the attractiveness of the sweet, jangling sound, but merely refers to the fact that a great number of the bells are ringing all at once.

A bed is never "made," it is "spread up," and pillows are not "smoothed," but "planed." About Winchester the old-fashioned word employed to describe the operation of rubbing off the shoots of sprouting potatoes, is "spearing"; the forester has never heard of such an expression, he "spindles" his potatoes. If a door sticks, after rain, the wood is "shripped" to make it shut more easily. A raised path across a garden—a very necessary thing where gardens are liable to become bogs or ponds in bad weather—is a "cossy," and the cottager who directs you to "that house with a brick cossy to the door," appears to have no idea that his word is a corruption of "causeway"; in fact, the same man will talk of the "cossy" that leads to his gate, and of the stones of the old "causeway," by which the monks of Beaulieu are said to have passed over the river Exe at low tide. Dry cow-dung is collected in quantities by the more thrifty of the folk, and made to serve as fuel; it is sometimes called "French coal," but this name is perhaps never used except as a term of derision, for prosperous, self-respecting foresters regard the practice of burning dung as unclean, and look with contempt upon those who indulge in it.

There is a good deal of class feeling among the people

who, in one way or another, get their living out of the land; and this is hardly to be wondered at. The ignorance of those lowest in the social scale, and the state of barbarism they are content to remain in, is extraordinary; and yet the poorest enjoy a prosperity which is unknown to the labouring class population of towns—they have their hens and chickens, their pigs, a pony or two, and very likely three or four cows as well. Take the case of a certain elderly woman who lives in a cottage by herself, and has no visible means of subsistence except the handful of shillings which her sea-faring son occasionally gives her. She pays one-and-sixpence a week for a pretty two-storied, thatched cottage, with a large garden, quite half-an-acre in extent. The garden is kept in perfect order, and in it she grows more vegetables than she can use. This woman owns a mare and a very promising yearling colt, which are turned out on the forest, summer and winter, and cost her nothing beyond the shilling or two she is supposed to pay—and probably has not paid—for identification marks; next year she will sell the colt for eight or ten pounds, and have another foal coming on. An eighteen-penny annual ticket gives her the right to gather as much wood—wind-fall—as she requires, and her thirty or forty head of poultry pick up at least half their food on the heath. The pigs in the sty are set free in the “pannage” season, and fatten themselves on acorns, and at all times there is ample green-stuff for them, and skim-milk may almost be had for the asking. That is one side of the picture. This is the other; the possessor

of all this live stock and these many privileges, can neither read nor write ; she owns no clock or watch, and could not tell the time by them if she had them—so she sometimes gets up at eleven o'clock, thinking it is seven, and sometimes at five, thinking it is eight ; from sheer want of any kind of education or civilisation she uses such language that keepers and neighbours suffer the maraudings of her fowls, and many other trespassings and minor pilferings, sooner than let loose the torrent of her wrath ; and she is content to sleep every night in a bed under which the water runs in winter.

Humanity, as we understand it, is practically unknown to the lowest class of forester. Here and there a man may be found who really cares for his creatures, but he is an exception. Sick or sorry horses are turned out on the heaths and left to live or die as best they can ; I think that one may say, without going beyond the truth, that a veterinary surgeon is never consulted. The other day I chanced to comment on the appearance of an old, lame mare—"as lame as a bat," a forester would say—which was travelling slowly over the Common ; the person to whom I made the remark, answered "Yes, she belongs to so-and-so," mentioning a particularly well-to-do and prosperous neighbour, "his son told me yesterday that they never gave her a feed all the winter because they expected every day to find her dead, but now she's picked up something wonderful." This speech was repeated without any sense of the atrocious indifference to suffering that it showed. And the poor beast will not yet get the bullet

through her head, which common decency demanded months ago, for there is some hope that she may be in foal, and as long as a mare can bear a foal, she is allowed to live, whatever her condition may be.

The kind of birds-nesting that goes on in the forest, is the most heartless and senseless that I have anywhere come across. On week-days the birds are for the most part left in peace, for the boys and lads are at school or at work, and have not time to make expeditions to any great distance from their homes ; but on Sundays, when all living things ought to enjoy the "truce of God," parties of three or four, or half-a-dozen, come out and patrol the heaths and woods. With their healthy, red-brown faces and swinging limbs, and their little bunches of flowers, pinned in true country-fashion to the front of their caps, they would be a pleasant sight if one did not know what they were after. First they make for the marsh, and their business there is not altogether purposeless. Without in any way justifying the proceeding, we may understand the pleasure of searching for moor-hens' eggs in the "segg" and eating them for supper ; for are we not all descended from primitive hunters who depended for their living on their skill in seeking, finding, and killing food, and have we not still the instincts of our ancestors dwelling in us—at any rate while we are young ? But every other egg of every sort and kind—except plovers', which are sold to dealers—is merely gathered for use in a foolish game which is a great favourite with these lads. Tits', finches', buntings', wagtails', warblers', thrushes', blackbird's

and many more eggs, are diligently sought until enough have been collected for the amusement. They are then arranged on the turf in irregular rows, with a space between each egg. The player stands on one leg with eyes blindfolded, and tries to hop on to as many eggs as possible, one after another, without touching the ground with his other foot. It can easily be imagined how large a number of eggs is wantonly destroyed in this way ; for unless a considerable quantity are used, the game must be but poor fun. The torn-out nests lying beside hedge and bush, testify to the thoroughness with which the sport is pursued.

IV

The great " horse-ants "—as country-folk call them—*Formica rufa*, which one finds in such abundance in the Forest, are so interesting in all their ways and works that it is impossible—even if birds are scarce or absent—ever to be dull when walking through the woods where they live. One of the most remarkable things about them, is their habit of using the same paths year after year and generation after generation. I know a well-worn ant-highway in the Great Copse, where the stream of traffic never ceases except in the dead of winter. This road, as straight as if engineered by the Romans, leads from one ant-city to another ; the first city is set upon a slope of rising ground, and the second lies in a ditch ; I say " the second " advisedly, for I had the

privilege of seeing this city's foundations laid, and therefore know that it is more modern than its neighbour, which stands higher in the wood. The ant's highway is obviously a great deal older than the stronghold to which it now leads; it doubtless served for many years as the path by which the broad grass ride that it traverses was always crossed, before ever the new encampment at the lower end of it was formed. The beaten track—long since trodden bare—is, roughly about two inches wide, and on each side of it grass and other close-growing plants flourish; they bend over and shade the public way, just as trees shade our high roads. All the ants do not keep to the track; some wander among the grassy groves beside the direct path, but those who are in a hurry, and in dead earnest about their tasks, go ahead as straight as may be—jostling the other workers whom they meet and bustling along as though filled with a sense of the importance of their business. Fresh building material and provender are constantly being carried into the townships; the building material consists of fragments of dry bracken, pine-needles, leaves and so on; while grubs, flies, aphides, and other insects, form the food-supply. I have seen what appeared to be a shining, pitch-brown object, about the size of the top of one's thumb, lying out in the middle of a ride, and, on stooping to examine it, have found that it was a dung-beetle entirely covered and wrapped up in a thick layer—possibly more than one layer—of great wood-ants. The perfect females of the wood-ants are nearly half an inch long, and the

largest of the workers are not very much smaller. All the workers are tree-climbers, wingless though they are ; they habitually seek blight and little green caterpillars among the leaves and on the twigs of oak-trees, many feet above the ground.

Where these large ants are assembled in thousands, and are all moving at once, one actually hears the noise of their foot-falls, like the faint pitter-patter of very fine rain. This tramping of the ants is one of the sounds which save the woods from ever being given over to complete silence, even on the stillest of still days. Another, and more universal, sound—heard, by the attentive listener, everywhere throughout the Great Copse—is the rustling made by the movement of innumerable spiders among the dead leaves which carpet the ground. Little, dark, short-legged spiders run perpetually over and under and through the dry litter, and the crackling and rustling that they make is sometimes astonishingly loud.

It is evident that in ant-communities sanitary laws are enforced—or, at any rate, that ants have some knowledge of the principles of sanitation, and a strong feeling for cleanliness. When a fresh nest is founded, and an old one, perhaps not more than three or four yards away, is deserted, the stuff of which the old nest is made is never carted to the new site to be used over again. The builders will hurry and scurry, here, there, and everywhere, to collect clean, sweet material—often being obliged to travel some distance to find what they want—but they will not touch the stale heap that lies

close at hand. Every poultry-keeper knows that neither chickens nor grown fowls will thrive for any length of time on stale earth ; and it is plain that ants are aware that the use of old building material would involve a risk to health. " Go to the ant," ye builders and house-furnishers, " and consider her ways and be wise."

One of the Rove-beetles, *Quedius brevis*, is often found sharing the home of the wood-ant. It abounds in the Great Copse, and is remarkable for its short, cornelian-red, wing-cases, its elongated black body, and its habit of flying by day. The beetles who live in ant-mounds appear to have little to do with their hosts ; but it seems unlikely that a creature so well able to manage its affairs as an ant, would offer permanent hospitality to another insect without getting some benefit in return. There are certain species of foreign ants who have been suspected—by scientific, not too credulous, naturalists—of keeping little, shiny-backed beetles as pets ; the beetles live habitally in the ants' nests, and the ants have been seen to polish their wing-cases with patience and care. It is, however, impossible for human beings to understand the details of the economy of the ant-world.

V

Whenever one is in a wood, no matter at what season of the year, one is tempted to say that of all natural

scenes a wood is beyond comparison the most beautiful ; purple hills and green well-watered valleys, heath-covered moors, blue seas, and sands with rocks and sunny pools, are forgotten, and woods are acclaimed as the most perfect of those things of beauty that are a joy for ever, that still keep for us "bowers of quiet . . . full of sweet dreams, and health and quiet breathing." And it is not extraordinary that it should be so. A wide open view, however much it exhilarates the spirit, lacks mystery—except such mystery as the imagination may be led on to seek beyond the far hills ; but every dimly-lighted recess in a deep wood is full of mysterious allurements. Who can tell what secret, elusive being lies hid behind the nearest tree-trunk, and what strange forms of life may be stirring within the closely-woven tangles of fern and thorn ? All belief in dryads and nymphs and fairies may have long since vanished, but something akin to a sense of their presence is wont to make itself felt in the heart of a wood ; leaves rustle when not a breath of wind is swaying the boughs, shadows fall and pass, and soft sounds are heard that are neither the cries of birds nor the murmurs of little scurrying beasts. Any thickly-wooded place, untenanted and unspoilt by man, will always remain for most of us, haunted and enchanted ground.

Apart, however, from their glamour of mystery ; woods have a peculiar loveliness and charm. It is hard to say which is most beautiful—the ground beneath the trees, the boles and limbs and spreading branches, the leafage, or the sky seen through meeting boughs and interlacing

twigs and sprays. Tree-trunks alone afford almost endless varieties of shape and colour : the tall, smooth, silver-grey shafts of beeches, the gnarled trunks of oaks—hoary with shaggy lichen, and supporting crooked limbs—and the columns of Scotch-fir brown below and cinnamon pink high overhead where the bark has flaked away. The boles of ashes have a distinctive colour of their own—pale in the young trees, and varying from dun to grey in the older ones. Under the oaks almost anything will grow, primroses and dog-violets and white anemones, wild strawberries and little yellow stars of wood-pimpernel, briars and brambles, and large bushes of thorn and holly ; but beeches seem to exercise a much stronger influence over the ground where they stand erect and reign in jealous dignity ; though they sometimes tolerate the presence of lowly flowers, they refuse altogether to shelter any of the shrubs that thrive in the shade of oaks and pines. As a rule, the finest beech-woods own bare floors, brown and russet with the trees' shed foliage. The great beauty of the noble beech-avenue in Savernake Forest, which stretches for many miles, largely consists, I think, in the contrast between the bare, dark, ground below and the sea of emerald leaves above—the two connected by long aisles of slender pillars.

VI

All along under hospital eaves the plaster nests of the house-martins are now filled with young ones. Back-

wards and forwards go the parent-birds from morning till evening, catching insects with which to fill the hungry mouths and gaping beaks. Sometimes the mother sits at home and only the father hawks for flies ; then when he returns he clings for a moment to the front of the nest with his tiny, white-stockinged feet, and warbles gently to his wife and family. Late at night, as late as eleven o'clock and for aught I know all night long, the young birds in the nest keep up an incessant chatter. It is the smallest noise conceivable, and it could not be heard as one walks down the roads were it not for the stillness and silence that prevail. One pictures the mother, tired after the day's labours—a working-day of at least fifteen hours—heated and oppressed in the confined space, and anxious to get some sleep before the first rays of the sun call her out to begin again “ the trivial round and common task ” ; and one fancies that the movement and the murmur of her nestlings must vex and weary her. But perhaps the low twitter is music in her ears ; and she may be soothed and comforted and hushed to sleep by the pressure of the warm restless little bodies that stir among her soft feathers—bone of her bone and flesh of her flesh animated by a throbbing life that is part and parcel of her own being.

VII

The number of yellow flowers which make their home in the meadows must have struck everyone who is interested in botany.

“ The wild marsh-marigold shines like fire
in swamps and hollows grey,”

ragwort gilds every damp pasture, yellow irises rising proudly above their sword-like leaves smile at their own reflections in the water, sheets of alien mimulus throw into the shade our native moneywort, tall yellow loose-strife pushes through the grasses on the river-banks, yellow water-lilies float by the side of their hard, round leaves, and everywhere the fields are gay with buttercups.

And it is not only in the meadows that yellow flowers exceed in actual quantity and in variety of species flowers of all other colours. Celandines and coltsfoot, primroses and cowslips are yellow, and so too are winter aconites and daffodils. Yellow stone-crop and yellow wall-flowers find foot-hold on old buildings and ruins in company with the pale yellow snapdragon. Mulleins and St. John's worts make bright our hedges, and there is no spot so bare that dandelions and hawkweeds cannot draw sustenance enough from it to expand their yellow discs. Rock-roses, horse-shoe vetches, and birdsfoot trefoil cover the downs, a glory of furze blazes on the hills, and yellow broom waves over gravel-pits and sandy banks.

This prevalence of yellow flowers need not surprise us if we remember that the study of plant evolution has suggested to scientific minds the idea that yellow is the original colour of all flowers—or rather, that all our white, pink, red, lilac, purple and blue flowers are descended from yellow ancestors. We are told that there was a

time when the reproductive organs, the pistils and stamens, of plants, were not contained in what we now call flowers ; they had no corolla, or " coloured frill " round them. But in the course of ages the plants learnt the importance of calling in insect aid to carry the pollen of one flower to the stigma of another. They therefore began to secrete honey to feed these fertilising agents—who, perhaps, at first consumed the useful pollen—and after a time hung out little flags to attract their attention to the sweet stores. The earliest flags or petals were green and very small ; as they expanded, the green brightened into yellow, the yellow varied in some individuals to orange, and so on through all the rainbow shades till blue, the final stage in colour development, was reached. The greater number of plants, however, found that conspicuous yellow corollas brought them all the pollen-carriers they required, so they did not trouble to dye their signalling petals any other shade.

VIII

Early in July, I found in the woods near Fawley some interesting natural objects which have received the popular local name of " Fawley buns." These objects are cushions of green moss not attached in any way to the ground, and with a velvet-pile surface on both sides ; they lie about loosely among the dry litter under firs and beech-trees, where there is no low growth of bushes or brambles. Knowing nothing about mosses, I sent

two or three of the cushions to an authority who I thought would be able to tell me what they were, with the result that they were pronounced to be "unattached, double-discs of *Leucobryum glaucum*." It seems that the occurrence of this strange growth of *Leucobryum* has only twice before been recorded in England; once in Buckinghamshire and once in Norfolk. The double discs look much like green velvet pin-cushions.

AUGUST

AUGUST

I

NOT long ago I had the luck to hear a first-hand account of that strange proceeding on the part of a mother adder of swallowing her young to safeguard them—a habit that, as we know, is not confined to *Vipera berus*. I cannot doubt that my informant believed himself to be truthfully describing to me a scene which he had actually witnessed. On a hot summer day—the narrator said—he went into his garden, which adjoined a rough grass bank such as adders love. He had left an iron shovel lying on the ground, and as he walked towards this shovel he thought that it looked “queer”; something seemed to have been thrown on to the metal blade or bowl—or whatever the digging part of a shovel is called—and the handle appeared thick and uneven. Drawing nearer, he saw to his astonishment that an old adder and her brood were enjoying a sunbath on his shovel; the mother was stretched out along the handle, and the young ones were grouped together on the warm, flat surface of the iron. No sooner did the careful guardian—always on the watch

with her jewel-bright, lidless eyes—spy an enemy approaching, than she opened her mouth and the adderlings scuttled into it and disappeared. “She made a strange grunting noise as the little ones went down, and then she reared up her head and hissed ;” afterwards a neighbour arrived on the scene and killed the mother and found the young adders still alive inside her—I was glad that my friend “had no stomach for the job” himself. Complete astonishment was apparently the only sentiment which filled his mind when he saw, first the family group, and then the sudden absorption of all the members of it into one, for—and this is what makes the story peculiarly interesting—he had never heard the common tale that the female adder causes her brood to take refuge within her in the hour of danger ; as soon, however, as he described to his acquaintance the strange thing that had happened, he was assured that everyone knew that vipers always swallow their young, and that lots of people had watched them doing it.

II

At this moment I find it difficult to think about anything but wasps. I am living in a state of siege with all the windows shut down to keep out the humming, swarming multitude ; it is impossible to eat a meal with a window open, for no sooner do the besiegers spy an aperture, than food and dishes are quickly covered with yellow and black thieves who refuse to be driven away.

Never before have I killed so many wasps. I have always maintained that they are pretty and harmless insects, and that they ought to be encouraged because of their slaughter of the germ-bearing fly ; but this year they have been too much for me and for my poor, scared dog, who dare not put his nose into his dish unless someone is at hand to assure him that all is safe—too often when he has opened his mouth to seize a piece of meat, a wasp has buzzed up into his face and sent him flying under the table. The fact that wasps are cruel and heartless cannibals makes me feel less guilty when I slay them by the hundred. It is said that if one wasp is killed, twenty come to the funeral ; one sometimes wonders whether the twenty when they come are even aware that the fragment of dead matter which they find is the body of a comrade—it is something edible, and that is all they care about. Occasionally a body is carried off entire, but more often the finder settles down comfortably to enjoy himself by cutting piece after piece from the carcase and packing up the cuttings to take away. I have lately been warned not to handle the bodies of the slain ; “ The stingers do not die till the sun sets,” and anyone who touches them before night-fall is liable to be stung. This seems to be the same idea as that which is deeply rooted in the minds of the foresters with regard to the adder ; all the country people in the New Forest believe that no matter how badly an adder is injured, he will not die till sunset—“ not if his bowels are cut right out.”

It is seldom that one now hears a plural formed by the

addition of "en"; we speak, it is true, of "oxen," but it is only in the Bible that we read of people being dressed in "their coats, their *hosen*, and their hats"; and it is only in an old nursery-rhyme—unknown perhaps to children of the present generation—that we ask "Whose little pigs are thesen?" and add that "we found them among the *peasen*." I was, however, told a short time ago of a Hampshire man—and not an old man either—who invariably makes the plural of wasp, "wapsen." "The wapsen are after the plums"; and so on. Naturally a wasp is always with him—as with every person without book-learning—a "wapse." In uncultivated speech there is generally a tendency to reverse the order of the final consonants in words ending with "sp." "Just 'apse the door," is a common instance of this reversal; the door or gate is to be "hasped"; *i.e.*, closely shut or fastened. The use of the term "hasp" in this sense, must itself be a survival from the days when doors were really fastened with a hasp passed over a staple.

III

Hot, thundery weather is snake-weather. On beds of dead fern and leaves, on bare patches of earth, and on dry islands of rush set in the midst of the marsh, adders and grass-snakes lie out and bask. The wanderer in the Forest as he passes along hears a light, rustling sound, and something—perhaps he is not quick enough to detect what the thing is—slips into the thick growth beside his

path and disappears. Or he may be more fortunate, and may see a gliding form moving before him and not gaining shelter until he has time to note the shining olive-green skin and pale collar of the ringed-snake, or the rich tints and chain-patterned back of the adder. And yet more lucky will he be if an adder stays a moment and lifts its head and hisses, and shows him all its grace and beauty.

An oppressive, thunder-laden day possesses a character of its own in this far corner of the world. The absence of any noise of traffic allows the stillness of the atmosphere to be felt as it never can be where men are busy passing to and fro and going about their work. Such sounds as there are, travel across the open spaces with a distinctness which the foresters say is a sure sign of thunder. A childish voice, high and piping and sweetened by distance, calls "Brindle, Brindle, where are you? Come along, Brindle, come up then, come, come"; every syllable is clearly heard, but it is on the far side of the Common that a wisp of white pinafore gleams, and a lazy cow turns reluctantly to leave a patch of grass that she has found under the shade of a dwarf willow.

Out on the sun-baked Common and in the close, green aisles of the Copse, the heat broods and quivers, and the slow brown stream which waters wood and heath scarcely seems to move over its pebbly bed. The cows' and ponies' tails lash, lash at their flanks incessantly in vain attempt to drive away the flies that swarm everywhere except on the banks of the *running* water—dark, stagnant pools are true temples of Beelzebub. There is no peace

for the cows in their grazing ; the tail-switches, useful as they are, cannot reach far along their backs nor rid their eyes and sensitive, twitching ears, of the tormentors, and every moment horned heads are thrown round with an impatient toss and rubbed against sleek shoulders. Birds and beasts help one another ; hens straying from some old cottage built on a piece of " stolen land "—land taken from the Forest long ago by squatters—step cautiously up to any cows that chance to be lying down, and, standing on tip-toe and stretching out their necks, pick off all the insects they can find. Ponies feeding close together pause from time to time to lick each other's rough coats and exchange nibbling caresses : and behind the ponies, follows here and there a wagtail, who watches until they stoop to crop the grass, and then runs in front of them and with repeated springs collects from round their eyes the flies that madden them. A wagtail usually selects one or two particular ponies for her attentions, and—ignoring the rest of the troop—returns to the same beasts over and over again.

Presently, after threatening all day, in the late afternoon the storm breaks. It has come up against the wind. " Sure to come up against the wind this time of year," a son of the Forest remarks, greeting the longed-for rain with delight. " They always come up with the wind before Midsummer and against the wind after ; but it isn't a set-storm, it'll soon be over." The warm turf on the heath steams, and as the ground is so hard that the water cannot sink in, the drops run together, and trickle down into every rut and hollow, where they form

little pools which will gradually soften the dry and thirsty earth. Among the willows and birches in a gully that runs up the Common from the Dark Water, a pony neighs and another answers it ; scared by the thunder they have taken refuge in the most sheltered spot that they can find. For a time the rain falls faster and faster, and then almost suddenly it ceases.

IV

Within the borders of the New Forest, " Forest-keeper " is a name to conjure with ; the forest-keeper is omnipotent and omniscient, his word is law, and he holds the fortunes of the foresters in the hollow of his hand. There is no appeal from " Forest-keeper says—" he can prophesy what the weather will be a month ahead, he is called in to decide whether a heifer is in-calf ; he hears the cuckoo before it reveals its presence to anyone else : " Have you heard the cuckoo yet ? " someone asks. " No, but forest-keeper heard it a fortnight ago," is the reply, and the impression is conveyed that it would be presumptuous for a mere woodman or cowherd to hear the cuckoo as soon as the forest-keeper. This " almighty man " can give work or withhold it—can make it easy, or impossible, for people to wrest a living from the Forest—and he must be conciliated at all costs. The question of the supply of new-laid eggs arises, and it is immediately said, " I'm bound to save a sitting for forest-keeper," or some comment is made on garden work being at a

standstill, and the explanation is given—"My husband looked to get that bit dug to-day, but forest-keeper, he called for him to help gather pheasants' eggs, and you've got to go when keeper wants you, there's no two words about it." Again, the household is aroused by the watch-dog barking at midnight, and it is related next day how "there was a scare of fire down at the cross-roads, miles away, and forest-keeper needed someone to go along with him so he fetched our Dad, and they didn't get back till all hours." A sojourner in the land carries home a shoulder-load of wood for the fire, and is greeted with the exclamation. "What would keeper say if he saw you!" "But," answers the puzzled visitor, "when I brought in that log yesterday you told me that you, as a commoner, had a right to it!" "Yes," the forester says, "that was wind-fall, but this is loppings, and all the lop belongs to keeper or to them that are over him."

Few people are more interesting to talk to than a forest-keeper who has followed his calling for many years; he knows a great deal, and has seen a great deal, but his knowledge is strangely mixed with ignorance, and while there is no doubt that he always believes himself to be speaking the truth, some of his stories are not easily accepted. But there is, alas, no question about the accuracy of the descriptions that the forest-keeper gives, of the burning of the commons. Every year some portions of the open part of the Forest—a greater or less area—are set on fire, either accidentally or wilfully and maliciously. Too often these heath-fires occur when

the furze-brakes are full of nests and the burrows full of young rabbits. As the flames leap forward and lick round bush after bush, rabbits with their fur alight bolt across the scorched ground, and birds fly out with smouldering feathers, and drop, perhaps, into some red-hot cave of glowing ashes ; if a sitting bird is near the time of hatching, she will not leave her nest until the fire is actually upon her. The keeper and his helpers, wading among the dry stuff and beating out the flames with heavy sticks and trampling feet, see clutches of eggs baked and cracking, and families of young birds roasted alive and falling through the charred remains of their nests. Pheasants who have nested outside the coverts are sometimes among the victims—though every effort is made to save them and their eggs from destruction—but the principal sufferers are linnets, yellow-hammers, stone-chats, and pipits, with here and there a pair of long tailed tits, or of willow-wrens, thrushes, or blackbirds.

Sworn enemy though he is to jays and magpies—and possibly to some other large birds whom he ought to look upon as friends—the forest-keeper is inclined to regard all the little birds in his woods, and all other birds that he accounts harmless, with a kindly eye. He is perfectly familiar with the appearance of every species that frequents the coverts, but many of them he cannot name correctly ; oddly enough, he has no name at all for the nuthatch—a bird that may be seen and heard all day long among the oaks—although he knows it well. “ Do you call that a nuthatch ? ” he says, and when one answers “ Yes,” and asks what he calls it, he can only murmur

doubtfully that he never before heard it called anything at all. One is glad to note that this keeper's regret—spontaneously expressed—at the almost total disappearance of the kingfisher from the stream that runs through his district, is obviously sincere ; and he is well aware that neither he nor anyone else in Hampshire is permitted by the law to kill the bird—"nor a wood-pecker either," he adds. In reply to an inquiry about the occurrence of the Greater and Lesser spotted-woodpeckers in his corner of the Forest, he is ready with news of a "wood-pie's" nest in an old oak in the Marsh.

"Wood-pie" is a common name—at any rate in Hampshire—for the Greater spotted-woodpecker ; the bird is black and white, and that is reason enough why it should be called a pie. On the coast of the New Forest I have found that the razor-bill—another black and white bird—is sometimes known by no other name but "curre-pie" ; this is curious, as the name "curre" is generally given to one of the diving ducks—either tufted-duck, golden-eye, or pochard.

What is one to make of the following piece of natural history ? The speaker is not the forest-keeper, but a man who was born and bred in the Forest, and has all his life followed out-door occupations which have afforded him ample opportunity for becoming well acquainted with wild birds and their ways :

"I never rightly knew the name of some birds we used to see over the Marsh near the sea, when I was a boy. They were bright blue, a splendid colour. No, they weren't kingfishers ; the gardener at the great house

has got a stuffed kingfisher he caught by the fish-ponds. and they weren't like that. Oh no, they weren't blue-tits—they were nothing so small—but they weren't big birds either, not so big as a blackbird. They were blue right all over, like the colour of a swallow's back when you see the light shining on it ; we called them ' blue-bottles,' and nobody ever saw them anywhere but flying over the water at Lepe Bridge. But there isn't any of them about now—I haven't seen one for ever so long, not for years."

V

A week or two ago the " cuckoo-spit " season was at its height, and all the plants and creepers in our gardens which produced juices suitable for the nourishment of frog-hopper larvæ, were adorned with little blobs of white foam. In the middle of each of these accumulations of sap, frothed into infinitely small bubbles by its passage through the creature's body, sat a greenish-white immature insect with pin-point, black eyes. These baby hoppers were soft all over, without the stiff wings and highly-developed legs of their parents, and the birds evidently considered them particularly appropriate food for newly-flown fledgelings. A mass of early Dutch honeysuckle growing on a paling in my garden, was flecked all over with white " spit," and a couple of great-tits spent most of their time creeping in and out among the trailers and collecting the tender larvæ which they

carried off to their fluttering, newly-flown young ones perched in a beech-tree close by. The beaks of the old birds were often covered with the clinging foam; this must have been a source of annoyance to them, for no bird is cleaner and better-groomed than a great-tit, and it was interesting to see them carefully wiping their bills from time to time on leaf or twig. Gardeners who complain of the damage done to shrubs and herbaceous plants by the industry of the sap-drawing frog-hopper, *Aphrophora spumaria*, should note that tits deserve a good mark for working hard to prevent the undue increase of the insects.

The jumping powers of these "frogs" are amazing; everyone knows how they will, when touched, spring from a flower and vanish into vacancy. It has been computed that the space covered by the ordinary leap of a hopper—a leap taken standing and unaided by its wings—is about as far in proportion to its size, as a flat-jump of three or four hundred yards would be for a man.

Much less common than the cuckoo-spit insects are their large cousins the Scarlet-hoppers, *Triepphoro sanguinolenta*. I have never found them anywhere but in a lane at Durley, and there only on the sunny side of the road at midday in fine weather. A year or two ago, I saw numbers of them sitting out on flowering heads of *Galium cruciatum* and basking in the hot sunshine of early June. No British insect is more brilliantly coloured than the Scarlet-hopper; its wings are barred with black and dazzling vermilion, and they are of such a texture that the black looks like velvet and the scarlet

has the glistening appearance which is seen in the petals of a red geranium if they are examined closely. When re-reading Darwin's autobiography the other day, I noticed that this hopper is the first insect mentioned by him; it possesses therefore an extrinsic as well as an intrinsic interest, and is worthy of special respect: "I must have observed insects with some little care," he writes, "for when at ten years old I went for three weeks to Plas Edwards, on the sea-coast of Wales, I was very much interested and surprised at seeing a large black and scarlet Hemipterous insect and many moths . . . etc., which are not found in Shropshire."

VI

A hurdle-maker who is employed in the woods from dawn to dusk has sent a message to me to say that he has more than once been lucky enough to see a pair of brown owls washing themselves at the edge of a stream or pond in the early morning. Their mode of procedure is always the same; one bird—presumably the male—goes close to the water and dips his face and flutters his wings and makes a great splashing, constantly tossing his head and throwing a shower of drops backwards over his shoulders; his mate, taking up her position immediately behind him, washes herself diligently in the water with which he sprinkles her. A more delightful sight than the two big brown owls thus enjoying their bath in the dim morning light, can

scarcely be imagined. That birds do not disdain to wash in each other's splashings, one has always known; but that a husband should throw up a fountain on purpose for his wife's use and pleasure—if this is the correct interpretation of the owl's proceedings—is an entirely new idea. A little tit coming to a pan of water set in the garden, to bathe itself, and finding the pan already occupied by a thrush or a blackbird, will often humbly wash in the drops that the bigger bird scatters; curtsying repeatedly, it will nestle its fluffed-out breast into the wet grass, and spread its wings, and turn its head from side to side to catch the cool moisture that it loves—it will even drink the pendent drops from off the grass-blades.

Who does not envy hurdle-makers and woodmen, shepherds and keepers, their opportunities of getting close to nature and surprising some of her secrets? And these opportunities are much more often appreciated and made good use of than some of the closet naturalists who spend their time shut up in their libraries reading and writing books, imagine. It is true that every plough-boy is not a Robert Bloomfield, nor every boatman an A. H. Patterson, but all over the country there are men engaged in homely occupation, by land and water, who are wise in bird-lore and weather-lore and the lore of beasts and fishes—lore derived at first-hand from their every-day surroundings and not painfully gleaned from other men's writings. They hear the night noises of the woods and can interpret all their meanings, they know the stars and

the times of their appearing, although they cannot call them by their names, they believe in the influence of the moon—and in many other things at which the learned scoff—and nothing in all the varied aspects of nature seems to them to wear a strange or unfriendly face. Such men have an immense advantage over those of us who go out from towns to seek wild things in their homes; try as we may, we can never become part of the country, part of the common environment of bird and beast. The shy creatures of the hedgerows know us for what we are—intruders, meddling in things which are not our lawful business. Our very clothes betray us and make hard, conspicuous blotches among the soft greens and olive-browns and purple-greys of the shadowy copses; they are not mellowed by wind and weather and brought to that pleasant neutral tint which melts into the harmonious scheme of colour seen in all the natural world.

SEPTEMBER

SEPTEMBER

I

THE coming of the Autumn means the letting loose of the professional bird-catcher; it means also the utter destruction of the pleasure and peace of mind of every observant and moderately sensitive individual who is in the habit of walking on the downs and through the country fields and lanes. Limed twigs and plantain-stalks are laid down all round the edges of the upland ponds where birds are forced to alight and drink if they are not to go waterless, nets are spread out on the fragrant turf, and twigs and nets both claim their captives by the hundred. When night falls, the living palpitating bodies that in the morning were flitting over the down-flowers and breaking out into happy song, are shut up in dark, airless cells, sentenced to perpetual imprisonment unless kind death releases them. And death is kind; it is probably no exaggerated estimate that places the death-rate of freshly-caught birds at considerably over fifty per cent. within the first week of their incarceration. How, indeed, could it be otherwise? Birds—our little warm-

blooded kinsfolk—are compounded of both flesh and spirit, and flesh and spirit are alike bruised and tortured by the cruel confinement. To judge from its song and its gestures and the brightness of its all-observant eye—and it is only from speech and language, from expression and action, that we argue the presence of souls in human beings—a bird possesses a soul of unusual sensitiveness, responsive to every change in its surroundings and quick to suffer as it is quick to rejoice with joy and singing. The withholding of sunlight and pure air must inevitably have a mental as well as a physical effect on the captives, and the savourless diet, the squalid lack of cleanliness, and the fluttering efforts to escape, complete the work that the quenching of the glad free spirit has begun. It is small wonder that so few of the birds survive the first days of confinement; rather is it wonderful that a single prisoner lives through the first hours of fright and misery. A bird-lover may be forgiven for wishing that the little tender bodies and emotional spirits were even more tender and emotional than they are; if capture invariably meant death within a night and a day, no gain could come from the catching, and the horrid trade of snaring, and the senseless custom of caging, would alike be non-existent.

The fact that it pays men to go out bird-catching in spite of the high rate of mortality among their victims, reveals to us the appalling extent of the mischief annually done to the feathered population of the country-side. The number of finches and linnets taken each season must be enormous—beyond our computation

—if sufficient return for labour expended is reaped, as we know it must be, by the ultimate sale of perhaps thirty or forty per cent. of the birds caught—the average price fetched by the common species being not more than fourpence a head. And there is something more that must be said about this lamentable destruction. The largeness of the death-rate that prevails among the captives after they have been taken home, does not by any means represent the total loss to bird life. When the clap-nets are from time to time closed by the man in charge of them, he proceeds to the examination of his haul ; the species and individuals that are worth keeping he seizes roughly and thrusts into his canvas pack, crushing their wings and bodies and apparently caring nothing how much he hurts and terrifies them—although they are now his goods and chattels, saleable articles, and therefore presumably of value to him. The species that are not worth keeping, and the songless hen-birds, are not as a rule liberated. Let anyone who has examined the spot where one of these heartless pliers of a heartless trade has been at work, answer the question as to what becomes of them. Blood on the grass, headless bodies, severed wings, and reddened feathers scattered all over the ground, suggest doings that we turn away from with closed eyes and ears stopped ; we are too delicate in our refinement to hear of the things that “ God’s lyttel jocund fowles ” are not too delicate to suffer.

II

Everywhere "the old order changeth giving place to new," and to a lover of the country the change seems always to be a change from the better to the worse. One of the most attractive features of our water-side lanes and hamlets used to be the old saw-mills with their overshot wheels, piles of barked tree-trunks, and clean, fragrant smell of freshly-sawn wood. Each generation, I suppose, sees the disappearance from the Itchen valley of one or more of these water-driven mills. The great blackened wheel wreathed with dripping weed is picturesque when it is at rest, and when it churns up the clear stream and sends torrents of white foam and sheets of glass-green water rushing down the leat it is a beautiful and fascinating sight. But it is not the wheel alone which charms us; the heavy staging of stained and weathered timber, the mellow brickwork giving foothold to clumps of hemp-agrimony, grass, and feverfew, and the sheltered frames filled with shaped blocks, are all alike delightful. After the tree-trunks have been sliced into planks of a certain thickness, some of these planks—almost invariably those from beech-trees—are selected for cutting into squares and oblong blocks to form the backs of brushes. These shaped squares are stacked in open sheds to dry. It is necessary that they should touch each other as little as possible, so that the air may reach them all round, and a traditional method of arrangement, which seems to be

much the same at all the mills, is employed. The result is a graceful, openwork screen, the tracery of which is built up with the utmost dexterity. Curved lines of blocks, each piece of wood supported by the next, slope upwards, and are held and surmounted by other curved lines, till the divisions of the frames are completely filled from the lowest shelves to the roof. Convenience alone has been considered in the stacking of the brush-backs ; beauty has sprung up unheeded by the way.

III

Ragwort—the “ Stinking Nannie ” of our country people—is a common, harshly-tinted weed which we seldom look at with any feeling of admiration. Nevertheless, it has a place and a value in Nature’s scheme of colour. Take a bare chalk hill where the soil is so dry and poor that long stretches of it are almost without any vegetable covering. There you may find sheets of dwarfed ragwort, the flat, conspicuous flower-heads raised scarcely a foot above the flinty ground ; and—associated and contrasted with this prodigality of yellow, honey-sweet blossom—thick, rough clumps of blue viper’s-bugloss rise stiffly out of the bleached moss and lichen. It is the glow of the worthless ragwort which lights up the whole of the cold, grey-and-blue scene. Or think of this plant, not stunted and forced into a wealth of almost leafless inflorescence, as we have seen it on the arid down, but drawn up in the dimness of a wood to a

height of six feet or more, its stem clothed with green leaves and its rayed flowers set loosely in a graceful corymb. Here it mingles with thickets of French willow-herb ; and again, as we look through the trees, we see that the rose-pink and green, the falling light and mystery of soft shadow, need the added richness of the swaying heads which the sun touches into patterned gold. We cannot afford to despise the humblest—or even the most mischievous—plants and bushes. The “rank, red weed that spoils the corn” gives us a more splendid blaze of colour than is found in any other English scene, thistles with their royal purple crowns and spiky, silver-green stems dignify waste places of the earth and redeem them from barrenness, and the detested bind-weed throws wreaths of noble white trumpets over the hedges. We talk scornfully of the thorns and brambles that stretch out vicious claws to tear our coats, and we forget that where the thorns are, there are the roses, and that without the brambles we should have no sweet and luscious blackberries.

IV

It would be easy to argue that fruits growing on trees—fruits which must be reached by climbing—have a special attraction for the young of the human race, because the immature animal of any race or species always tends to reproduce the characteristics of its remote ancestors. A typical boy, with the healthy

instincts of his kind, is never so happy as when he is scaling a tree—the more difficult of access the better—and we may see in this love of climbing a reversion to the habits of our arboreal, ape-like forefathers who ran wild in savage woods and subsisted on the nuts and various fruits which they plucked ; the survival and well-being of these rude forefathers must have depended on their agility and suppleness of limb. When we grow older, and can no longer climb ourselves, we take pleasure in watching the climbing feats of other creatures ; and it seems possible that it is a special sympathy—a something in our blood which æons of human civilisation and human limitations have failed to eliminate—that makes us delight, for instance, in the fearless adventures of the squirrel among the tree-tops, his scrambling ascent and descent of perpendicular trunks, and his bold leaps from branch to branch. Since the wild cats have gone, the little, bush-tailed squirrel is our only English arboreal beast, and everyone who is not a game-preservee values him for his beauty and grace, and for his skill in the difficult and fascinating art of climbing.

The best place to look for squirrels is in a wood containing plenty of well-grown specimens of the Cluster pine, *Pinus pinaster*. There is not a squirrel living who would not sell his soul for the seeds hidden in the cones of this tree. The Cluster-pine, where it thrives, grows to a great height, and carries on the top of a straight, almost naked trunk, a rounded head of thick branches. The trunk does not scale off its outer covering towards the summit in the way that the Scotch pine does, but is

rough of surface from the ground to the uppermost bough, and it usually carries a crop of silver-grey lichen which outlines the deep cracks between the rugged segments of the bark. The cones are very large, sometimes measuring as much as seven or eight inches in circumference at the thickest part, and five or six inches in length. In a copse where squirrels are allowed to live, there is no need to look upwards to distinguish the Cluster pines from other conifers that may be planted with them; the ground round every tree of this species will be found littered with the refuse that the mischievous little creatures have thrown down, and a casual glance along an alley will at once tell a practised eye whether *Pinus pinaster* is growing in it or not. It is not the cones only that are plucked and dropped, but twigs and small branches and bunches of green needles and—in the flowering season—pollen-bearing heads, are all scattered in a wide circle on the dry, brown carpet of the wood. The squirrels are very improvident, for they pick the unripe cones as well as the ripe ones, and drop them in sheer wantonness, and they tear off the blossomed tufts whose inflorescence promises a rich harvest of seed. A hunt for cones among the fallen *débris* is an interesting pursuit, but perfect cones are not easily come by; as a rule every scale is stripped away and only the woody core left intact. Although these bare cores are no good for the summer filling of empty grates—a purpose for which, by reason of their size and handsomeness, the cones are often coveted—they need not be despised as fuel; the resin in them

seethes up and burns brightly in a wood fire, and fills a room with a warm, pleasant fragrance.

When a pine tree has been cut down, the flat-topped stump left in the ground makes a very handy table for the squirrels. Such a stump—well concealed by undergrowth from the green rides where man, the enemy, takes his walks abroad—may often be found covered with the remains of the last meal; denuded cones and freshly-nibbled scales lie thickly round it, and little flakes of the thin seed-wings rest upon its surface. All points to the fact that but few hours have elapsed since the meal was eaten, and yet one may wander day after day through the pine-wood and never catch so much as a glimpse of a ruddy tail disappearing behind a tree-trunk. It may not infrequently happen that a Cluster pine is visited in the evening and not a vestige of a cone discovered on the ground beneath it, and the next morning half-a-dozen newly plucked cones, in varying stages of demolition, may be seen placed conspicuously on the very spot where the careful search of the night before resulted in no single find. The squirrels have learnt wisdom by experience; if the early bird catches the worm, the early squirrel takes his ease in his "Green Mansions" without fear of popping guns. When the dew lies like a sheet of molten silver on the heath and the marsh is veiled in mist, when the mother woodcock gathers up her young from the dry moss under the hazels and carries them afar to their feeding ground, then the squirrels frisk and chatter in the pines and nibble the green needles and sappy twigs and work havoc among the cones.

V

There is no lack of colour in the September woods. Autumn tints have not as yet begun to dye the trees amber and gold and brown—and the foresters say that owing to the drought the leaves will fall this year before they have time to turn—but the berries are already orange-red on the hollies, the bracken mingles its russet with the purple of bramble-trailers and the scarlet fruit of briars, and the heads of the tall pines look sea-green beside the heavy, sapless foliage of the oaks. Seeing the round caps of swelling fungi pushing up everywhere through the grass of the hard-trodden paths and the soft, rich mould of the ditches, one is tempted to misapply Banquo's words: "The earth hath bubbles, as the water has, and these are of them." Many fungi have a curiously bubble-like appearance when they first break through the surface of the ground; a cluster of globular heads of different sizes, coloured a dingy sulphur-yellow, springs up here, and a little clump of ivory-white balls shows there—the stems still hidden and undeveloped—and farther on a large, brick-red "bubble" raises itself with such a vigorous thrust and lift that it seems as though some imprisoned vapour must be sending it upwards. The broad discs of the lurid *Boletus* form patches of warm colour all about the tracks through the Copse. Some of the biggest specimens turn up the edges of their caps when they have finished growing and expanding, and expose the

hemisphere of pale sponge-like substance underneath ; after a shower these fungi hold a few drops of water in their shallow cups, and viewed from a little distance they look like strange goblets—chalices of *La Messe noire*—filled with unholy witch's wine. There is not, I think a prettier toadstool in the forest than a small milk-fungus which grows abundantly under the trees and along the borders of the rides. The apricot-orange heads are not more than an inch across, and one cap alone would be inconspicuous, but a multitude of them dotting the grass and springing from the ruts in the pathways, gives almost as much brightness to the recesses of the woods as they gain from the blossoming of summer flowers. The sodden oakleaves which lie half-buried in the ooze of the wet ditches, support a little fungus of their own ; from the decaying substance of the leaf rises a dark stem fine as a thread, and on the summit of this stem is borne a tiny, pallid cap.

VI

Some little time ago an article on " Magic " appeared in one of the weekly papers. It was interesting because it described a certain detail of human experience with which we are all familiar, but which few of us have attempted to put into words. Why is it—the article enquires—that some things have for us a peculiar emotional attraction, while others which are as beautiful, as noble, as venerable, or as pathetic, fail to affect us

at all? The only answer which the writer could give to the question which he himself propounded, was this : that there is no explanation, that this indefinable attraction is what he chooses to call " Magic "—the mysterious working of a hidden sympathy whose source we cannot trace. It is not a matter of old association, for a thing seen or heard for the first time may possess " Magic " for us ; a line of poetry, a phrase of music, a wide-spreading view, a homely nook or corner of the country—suddenly, inexplicably, it lays hold of us and cannot be forgotten ; and it often happens that we are able to renew the sensation and feel again the charm, at will. There is sometimes glamour even in the mere sound of a name, though the name may stand for a place which we never have seen and never shall see in this life. Is it possible that as we inherit talents—and vices—the shape of our noses and the colour of our hair, so we inherit also obscure memories and emotions? Has a certain combination of sounds, or forms, or words, power to move us because, in the far past, a like combination was present to the sense of some ancestor at a supreme moment of his life?

There is one spot in the south of Hampshire, not above half-a-dozen miles from Winchester, which holds for me this quality of " Magic " in a supreme degree ; I wish it were possible to translate into words the feeling that it inspires. A narrow grassy lane—so narrow that when, at rare intervals, a cart pushes through it, the bushes are broken and bent on either hand—leads to the foot of a very old chalk-pit. Long exposure to the

weather has stained the face of the chalk rust-brown and grey, and crumbling earth and ragged tufts of grass mark the track of miniature landslips caused by disintegrating frosts and soaking rain. Tall trees grow on the top of the cliff and stretch out their arms beyond the overhanging edges, and the sides of the pit, which curve round and enclose a deep hollow, are thickly clothed with a mass of thorn and briar and dog-wood. The circular space thus shut in, is of some extent, and the ground is partly cut up into old ruts and depressions—which in all but the driest weather hold little pools of water—and partly hidden under a tangle of vegetation. Hazels, elders, wayfaring-trees, and black-thorns, crowd together and almost conceal the end of the lane where it opens into this secluded dell; the civilised world might be a hundred miles away—it is happily out of sight and out of mind. Black-streaked stalks of poisonous hemlock rise to a height of seven or eight feet, and under them grow beds of ragwort and rank nettle, mingled with patches of lurid hound's-tongue and the upright green spires of dyer's-rocket. On the sloping banks facing south, the flowers are of a brighter and more wholesome kind; the cheerful purple-red of marjoram and sweet-basil catches the sunlight, and the nettle-leaved campanulas display their pale mauve blossoms which well-nigh rival the Canterbury-bell in size. Low-growing speedwells, ground-ivy and dog-violet leaves, and scrubby hawkbits, carpet the earth in the open spaces, while the nut-trees shelter a forest of perennial-mercury. Here and there is to be

seen a root of the beautiful musk-mallow with tender, shell-pink flowers and finely-cut leaves like the leaves of a scented geranium.

During the next few weeks this hidden dingle will be at its best—all the berry-bearing trees laden with fruit, and all the fruit-loving birds flocking to the feast. The beeches which droop their boughs over the edge of the pit are brown and rough with mast, the haws are taking on a red tint, the clusters of the mealy-guelder rose are scarlet, and the berries of the elder are only waiting for a little sunshine to turn from green to purple and fill themselves with juice. The clatter of wood-pigeons' wings is already heard among the bushes, and thrushes and blackbirds eye the brambles and wonder whether the hard fruit is still too sour to be eaten. Silvery thistle-heads, scattering their down with every puff of wind, attract greenfinches and linnets from the fields above; the little birds alight on the dry stems of various lesser weeds and daintily peck at the seed-vessels, and when they flit away, shake the bending stalks with the jerk of their departure. One after another, they drop down to the moist ground and sip the water from the cart-ruts. The handsomest of the male greenfinches look almost more yellow than green as they fly; pale lemon-yellow feathers are conspicuous in their spread wings and tails, and the olive-green of their backs is strongly tinged with yellow where the light falls upon it. The privet that grows in the hedges beyond the lane will entice the linnets as soon as it ripens its black berries—and this the bird-catchers know only too well.

VII

A few days ago, I bought from a man "on the road" two toy pipes that he had made out of the stalks of Soft-rush, *Juncus effusus*. The bowls of the pipes were worked in a pattern of twisted knots and the interlacing of the rushes was most ingenious. Not only was the plaiting and winding of the stalks admirably neat and even, but they were so cleverly arranged that the light portions which are found at the bases of the rushes formed a series of rings round the smooth pipe-stems and round the edges of the bowls. The stems were more than a foot long and curved like the stems of Churchwarden pipes, and the bowls were well-proportioned. Unfortunately the dry atmosphere of a warm room soon caused the green rushes to shrink and entirely spoilt the appearance of the toys. I have often seen whips made in the same way and sold in the streets; but I have never before noticed rush-pipes among the wares of any hawker, and the man from whom I bought them said that they were his own invention. This may or may not have been true; at any rate the fingers that were clever enough to manipulate to such good purpose bits of green stuff plucked by the roadside, ought to have been able to earn for their owner a better living than he is likely to pick up tramping along the dusty highways from one town to another.

VIII

There is no surer token of the passing of summer and the coming of autumn, than the assembling of willow-wrens and chiff-chaffs in our gardens and shrubberies ; just as great numbers of these little warblers are heard all about the south of Hampshire on the morrow of their arrival, so are great numbers of them seen in the same districts on the eve of their departure. We take but small notice of the slim, olive-grey forms of the migrants as they slip about among the willow-buds and the fresh green leaves of the hedge-rows in early April ; all our attention is directed to their voices—the tender, chromatic scale of the willow-wren, and the vigorous “chiff-chaff” of his more noisy cousin. But in the autumn things are changed ; these warblers leave the woods and meadows and resort to garden ground, they leave the cover of the bushes and come out on to the pea-sticks and bean-sticks and feed on the blight which they find upon the twining stems and buds. They flit hither and thither, and poise themselves on the blossomed sprays of sweet-peas or scarlet-runners and stretch out their slender necks to pick off the insect pests ; and all the time they are silent, except for the occasional utterance of a faint, sweet, complaining note. “Where are the songs of spring, yea, where are they ? ” Gone—with the season of courtship and matrimony. Now and then one hears a desultory “chiff-chaff, chiff-chaff,” or a single plaintive cadence from the willow-

wren, but for the most part song is forgotten, and the thoughts of the birds—if thoughts they have—are occupied with sterner things than love and idle dallying ; their faces are set towards the coast.

But, first and last, the warblers' character and disposition are the same. Small as they are, gentle and delicate as they look—more harmless than any dove—there are no birds more irritable, more intolerant of their neighbours, and more pugnacious, than the two common leaf-warblers, the chiff-chaff and the willow-wren ; their one recreation seems to be the annoying of other little birds. Looking back over the notes I made in the New Forest last spring, I find under the date April 11th : " Chiff-chaff chasing male stone-chat on the common from twig to twig and from bush to bush. Stone-chat scolding incessantly, with an indignant and surprised tone in its voice." On Saturday, August 31st, I watched a flight of nineteen long-tailed tits, accompanied by a single blue-tit, passing across a roadway, from one garden to another ; they were all uttering a querulous tinkle-tinkle, and behind them came a tiny warbler—either willow-wren or chiff-chaff—teasing and harrying the hindmost long-tail, and literally making it cry. The poor little bird dropped into the first shrub it came to, while its fellows made off into a high tree, and there it remained, lamenting itself in a voice that I should not have recognised as a long-tail's had I not seen it weeping ; its pursuer alighted on a twig close by, and hopped to and fro, daring it to move. It is evident that from the day of their landing on our

shores until the day they go, the leaf-warblers delight in bullying any birds small enough to submit to their persecution. When the hunted are sparrows—as they often are—the onlooker cannot but enjoy the sight of their discomfiture; overbearing braggarts themselves, they well deserve all the teasing they get. The absurd part of the matter is, that willow-wrens and chiff-chaffs are such small and defenceless creatures that if the feeblest of their victims were to turn on them they must instantly be put to flight.

OCTOBER

OCTOBER

I

IT fell to my lot not long since to witness a scene which filled me with sorrow, anger, and amazement. I was having tea in the parlour of a country inn, and on a grass plot outside the window were seated two or three people who bore the aspect of city-bred tourists. To them entered a lad carrying an air-gun. From his right hand dangled an "ox-eye" tit. He was greeted with many exclamations about the beauty of the prize which he had bagged. "Do you know what it is," said a woman, who was, I suppose, his mother. "Oh yes," the boy answered, "it is a sort of greenfinch. This one," producing the dead body of a robin, "is not so pretty!" I looked to hear some expression of regret, some murmur that this little fowl might, as it was the familiar redbreast, have been spared. But no; there was only a complacent assent to the statement that it was *not* as pretty as the other bird. When I paid my reckoning, I suggested to the landlord that the sort of sport which was being indulged in by the people staying in his house did not conduce to the pleasure and enter-

tainment of his other guests. He said "What could he do? The tenant of the fields behind his inn had no objection to the lad shooting small birds there; he himself thought it a pity, and he didn't care to see it, but he couldn't interfere with his customers; they had come down from London, and of course they liked to amuse themselves."

Of course they liked to amuse themselves! When they had amused themselves long enough with shopping and music halls, and exhibitions and motor-'buses they, naturally, liked to vary their amusement by coming down into a rural village and lounging in an inn-garden and loafing about with air-guns. And it is nothing and less than nothing to such people as these that in seeking their own senseless amusement, in following their wanton pleasure, in gratifying their brute instincts, they are doing their best to tear the heart out of the country which they profess, I suppose, to admire and to enjoy. What would the fields and woods and hedgerows be without the feathered life which animates them? Every bird in every bush, every bird floating in the air, swimming on the water, calling over the downs, is the sacred property of those among us who have the wit to appreciate so inestimable an inheritance. When such destroyers, dull of eye and bereft of understanding, break into our treasure-houses and lay unscrupulous hands upon the precious heirlooms which we hold in trust, they commit a more cruel and mischievous robbery than if they raided our orchards or rifled our plate-chests. It is all very well to say

that robins and tits still abound throughout the length and breadth of the land. Thank Heaven, they do. But flocks of bustards once sped over Worthy Down, bitterns bred on Winnall Moors, ravens croaked from the trees of Avington, kites soared above Selborne Hanger, and the furze-patches near Bournemouth were alive with Dartford Warblers. Where are they now? It will be no thanks to the holiday-makers who come down from town with murder in their pockets, if none of the birds which now delight us has a hundred years hence become extinct.

II

The spider who is led by fate or chance—or whatever rules over the destiny of the race—to spin her geometric web from point to point across a mass of ivy-blossom, is a spider born under a lucky star. No insect that flies can resist the temptation of ivy-nectar, and the ogre who sits in the middle of the beautifully woven snare spread where it abounds, suffers from nothing but an over-stocked larder. One mild October morning, I was watching all the winged guests flocking to the ivy on a southern wall, when a torn web which was fastened to the flower-heads, caught my eye; the web was broken and tangled and drawn here and there into white ropes made up of many strands of fine thread. The reason of the dilapidated state of the snare was evident; it held in its meshes the bodies of large and small blue-bottles

of yellow-banded hover-flies, and of numerous flies of lesser degree—each body rolled in a silken winding-sheet. The struggles of the victims when resisting to the utmost their captor's determination to enshroud them, had ruined the slender net-work, and the plump matron spider who was resting under the shadow of a leaf hard by, seemed far too indolent and full-fed to trouble to repair it; she knew that she had enough fresh meat laid up in store to last her for some time to come. It was not a pleasant thought that in many of those white-veiled forms, closely bound to the cruel web, life probably still lingered. The spider prefers newly-killed meat to stale, and she rolls up her prey in coil after coil of sticky rope, and hangs the living bodies up in her shambles to wait until she feels inclined for a meal; then she selects one, drives in her poisoned fangs, and sucks the carcase dry. I say "she," because it is practically always the large female—nearly half-an-inch long when full-grown—and not the much smaller male, of the garden cross-backed spider (*Epeira diadema*) that one notices. The common, long-legged spider who weaves her snare in the corners of ceilings and window-frames, *Pholcus phalangioides*, has the same habit of hopelessly entangling her victims. Directly she sees—or feels—that a fly is entrapped in the strands of her web, this spider rapidly agitates the whole of her body and imparts a quivering motion to the maze of slightly viscid threads; the threads are not arranged in any regular order, as are the threads spun by geometric spiders, neither are they tightly stretched, but they cross and

recross each other in every direction and hang loosely from their fastenings, so that there is plenty of "slack" to the ropes to wind round and secure any unfortunate fly who gets mixed up in them and is farther confused by their sudden and violent vibration.

III

On October 11th, old Michaelmas Day, the stream of traffic on the broad highways becomes an interesting study to the wayfarer. All over the country, carters, cow-men, shepherds, and farm-labourers are "shifting," going out from the known and the tried to the unknown new dwelling-places where everything will be strange and unaccustomed—from the master to the patient chained dog in the stable-yard, and from the trend of hill and hollow on the arable fields to their own cottage hearths. Heavily-laden wains move slowly along the roads, drawn by great, strong horses glittering with polished brooches and buckles. Piled high on the waggon are all the goods of the country folk who are flitting, and up in front sit the farm-hands' wives and little children. One child clasps in her arms a cat which looks wild and scared; its ears are set back, and its widely-opened eyes notice nothing but the cold unfamiliarity of its surroundings. Geraniums, still in blossom, have been hastily rooted up from the forsaken gardens and thrust into tubs and buckets to take their chance of renewed life in the home which is not yet—and will

not be for many weeks to come—*home*, at all. Perhaps a flat, wicker basket swings below the tail-board, and at every jolt of the wheels a frightened clucking comes from it; white and tawny feathers shew between the osier bars, and now and then a red comb appears and is jerked from side to side. A canary in a cage rests against a bundle of bedding, and a fretful girl—tired with packing, tired with sitting still in a cramped position, and tired with an emotion which she feels but does not understand—stretches out her hand to steady the cage as the waggon sways and rattles. She envies her brothers who are walking behind and getting a good deal of excitement "out of the journey. In the morning they whistle and climb the banks to pick blackberries and cut sticks, they hunt for live things which they think they see in the hedgerows and are called to order by their father, they race each other from bridge to post, and are filled with the spirit of adventure; but towards the late afternoon they are inclined to quarrel over their switches and peeled elder-rods, they walk wearily beside the cart, holding on to a dangling chain or board, and they think with regret of the empty hutches in the old back-yard and the rabbits they have "swopped" for a knife or a few pence. At night the smoke rises sadly from a strange chimney, and the trees that are seen through its blue, curling vapour, wear no friendly aspect. Beds are made up in rooms scarcely freed from the litter of other folks' departure—alien rooms which have seen the birth of other folks' children and the laying-out of other folks' dead—and the morning

brings the harassing toil of "settling in," of making things fit which will not fit, and of searching for strayed and forgotten properties.

IV

Children of the present generation do not appear to amuse themselves with the life and vigour that were put into the games of thirty and forty years ago; neither are they so ready as their fathers were to seize on every opportunity to play. How long is it since one saw a flotilla of paper boats sailing down a flooded gutter? Possibly the making of paper boats—double canoes, Chinese junks, and so on—will soon be a lost art. Skipping-ropes and whip-tops have vanished from the streets—scared away by traffic and the police—level spaces on road and pavement are seldom marked with the six-squares-and-an-oblong of hop-scotch, and the good old game of knuckle-bones, which came down to us from the Romans, is almost forgotten. The other day I saw some boys trying to play at "dibs" with pebbles; but more than half the variations were unknown to them. I longed to instruct them in the mysteries of prefaces, ones, twos, threes, fours, and dobbs, single and double creep-mouse, change-'ems, crackers and silencers, long-arm, short-arm and spans, arches, pepper-pots and everlastings. Even errand-boys have ceased their irrepressible, gay whistling; here and there one pipes a tune, but no universally-

popular airs are heard on every side as they were in the days of our youth. It is possible that country villages may still be merry and cheerful. In the towns, guilds, classes, lads' brigades, and girls' clubs seem to have organised all the light-hearted animation that should belong to childhood and good health, till they have organised it out of existence.

V

On a mild sun-lit afternoon, a week or two ago, when the south-west wind was ruffling the river into little waves like ripples on the sand, I came by chance upon a charming scene in bird life. Under the shadow of some large trees a brook had overflowed its banks and flooded the meadow, and between the green rushes of the brook and an old lichen-stained fence, lay a pool ringed round with drifts of fallen leaves. Some of the yellow elm leaves floated on the surface of the water, others were dark and sodden and drowned by the flood, and others again stirred and shifted restlessly when the breeze swept across the grass. The bare branches of the trees, the blue sky and bands of pearl-grey cloud, were reflected in the miniature lake, and two pied wagtails waded in its shallows. The birds jerked their pretty black and white heads, and dipped their pointed bills, and gently swayed their long tails up and down; and every time they moved, tiny circles spread from round their wire-fine legs and lost themselves among islets

of leaves and groves of speared grass-blades. The picture recalled memories of tall herons fishing in the wide salt marshes, and of ringed-plovers running over wet sands and meeting together in pools left behind by the receding tide; and because the little, familiar wagtails seemed to have something in common with these waders by the shore, they gained an added charm, and their slender forms and graceful ways appeared more than ever delightful.

VI

Of all the bird-haunted spots in Hampshire, none is more attractive to the ornithologist than the Keyhaven marshes—especially if he be, as every field-ornithologist is almost bound to be, a lover of solitude. The loneliness of these marshes in Autumn is remarkable, considering how near they are to houses and to a seaside village which during the last few years has almost grown into a town. One may walk for an hour or more along a strip of rabbit-nibbled turf, with furze-bushes and brambles on one side and the shingled edge of the salt-marshes on the other, without meeting a human being. At high-tide, the clear water laps the shingle and drowns the beds of cord-grass that stretch southwards, and at low-tide it retreats far away and leaves the mud-flats bare. The brown, green-stained, mud is veined with trickling runlets, with here and there a wider channel, and to the west, just inside Hurst Spit, the Dane-stream

comes out and crosses the marsh, winding through rush and grass till it loses itself in the Solent. A land-locked pond lies near the head of the Spit, and when the tide is in and their feeding-grounds are covered, gulls and ringed plovers, with perhaps a swan or two and a couple of herons, resort to this pond and its banks and wait patiently for the hindering flood to be sucked down again to the sea. Sometimes a flock of more than a hundred gulls may be seen resting motionless on the sloping ground above the water's edge, each bird's beak pointed straight towards the quarter from which the wind is blowing. Beyond the hamlet of Keyhaven, with its grass-grown quay and posts and shorings of weathered timber, a narrow river, the Avon Water, runs out through hatches into the marsh; above the hatches it widens into pools bordered and islanded with sedge, and here are found such fresh-water birds as coot and dabchicks—who, however, forsake the river for the sea in times of hard frost and bitter cold. Over fresh water and salt alike, the kingfisher speeds. On a sunny morning, a week or two ago, I was standing by the Avon Water watching three or four sooty, "bald-headed" coot propelling themselves slowly forwards, when a turquoise and sapphire bird flashed out from almost under my feet and disappeared behind a hedge of tamarisk that overhangs the stream; not five minutes later, a second kingfisher hurried low across the open creek, travelling from the opposite direction.

Seawards, and towards the east, the reed-beds rise high enough to conceal all the water-ways and the open

channel from view when one is walking on the level marsh, and to the west the stormy rampart of the Spit cuts off the distance and runs out to the tall light-house. The sight of the tops of masts and sails gliding along just above the ridge of the Spit, comes as a surprise—it is difficult to realise how near one is to deep water. Away in the Solent other sails pass continually by; white and tawny-red, they catch the sun's rays and stand out conspicuously against the grey background of the Isle of Wight; the boats beneath them are invisible, and masts and sails appear to be travelling over fields of grass. Perhaps the sudden flight of a band of ringed-plovers—every bird uttering its musical alarm-note—attracts one's attention to a man's head moving mysteriously through the reeds. The owner of the head is punting a boat up a narrow creek where the water is dead low; his task is a laborious one, requiring care and patience, for the channel curves and twists and curves again and as the minutes pass he gets but little nearer, as the crow flies, to the shingle beach where he must land. Each curve of the creek is hidden from the next reach by a corner of the reed-bed, and the course of the boat is marked by the perpetual rising of birds that have been feeding on the mud and have not seen the craft till it was close upon them. Now it is three or four redshanks who get up, and now a mixed company of gulls and starlings, and now a great heron who flaps away with "slow measured beat of his broad, rounded vans." The redshanks call loudly and dash off, showing the beautiful silver-white borders to their wings; when they

have gone far enough to have left all danger behind, their cry changes to that wild, melodious note which is peculiarly dear to all bird-lovers.

VII

After visiting Hurst Spit again and again in bright sunshine during the spell of perfect weather that carried summer on into the middle of October, I finally visited it in a downpour of rain and said goodbye to marsh and sea and shingle-beach under a leaden sky. I had the whole place to myself except for a solitary fisherman who stood knee-deep in mud and water by the out-flow of the Dane-stream; he was tall and thin, silent and almost motionless, and he seemed a human counterpart of the lean grey heron who also was fishing, or watching for fish, on a bank that the ebbing tide had left uncovered. There was no cry of redshank or of gull to break the monotony of the only sound to be heard—the sullen, muffled thunder of the sea beyond the bar—and even the restless pipits sat dumb and dolorous on the dripping thorn-bushes that border the shore-path. I wandered along the ridge of the Spit in the drenching rain, reluctant to leave it for the last time without seeing or hearing something to mark the hour in my memory—something new or of special interest. And presently the something that I wished for manifested itself. Looking out over the dull, cold waves that perpetually rolled landwards and broke in yellow foam

on the pebbles at my feet, I detected a dark object that was lifted well above the water. No sooner was it seen, than it was gone. Again it rose, and now it was easily recognised as the head and neck of a big bird, but once more it dipped and vanished. I patiently directed my field-glasses time after time to a spot where the straight, black pillar of neck stood up for a moment, only to be mocked by a sudden dive and a reappearance at some distance. I ought to have realised much sooner than I did that it was a cormorant that I was watching—a common enough bird, to be seen any day hurrying with beating wings across the harbour or away over the narrow channel. But it so happened that I had never before come upon a cormorant—an “Isle-o’-Wight parson,” as every dweller on the shores of the Solent calls the great black-coated fowl—engaged in seeking its prey in the open sea. The length of time that the creature seemed to stay under water was surprising, though as this bird frequently swims with the whole body submerged, it may often have come up to breathe without my catching sight of its head among the moving waves; it is, however, known that cormorants are in the habit of hunting fish under the sea for considerable distances—propelling themselves forwards with their strong webbed feet, and not, as do the auks and some other divers, with strokes of the wings. At length the fisher’s diligence and my patience were alike rewarded—its head and neck popped up, the whole body showed above the water, there was no swift downward plunge, and through my glasses I could plainly see a large

flounder or plaice struggling in the powerful beak. The fish curled itself round and twisted and writhed, as a worm writhes and twists in the beak of a thrush, and behold, it was gone—bolted whole with the life still vigorous within it. Possible the sensation of having in its gullet a living, struggling fish at least twice as long, and a good deal more than twice as wide, as its own head, is peculiarly pleasant to a cormorant; ornithological books tell us that a fish fourteen inches long has been taken from the gullet of one of these birds that had been feeding just before it was killed. It is on account of its proverbial voracity and its capacious maw, that all legal protection has, at the earnest request of persons interested in the fishing industry, been withdrawn from the cormorant.

After the flounder had been caught and swallowed, its captor remained on the surface of the sea and dived and fished no more; the bird's appetite was for the moment satisfied, and it ceased to be the poet's "ducking cormorant." A short interval of quiet riding on the waves—during which the dusky form was sometimes hidden behind their advancing crests and sometimes uplifted on a long roller—was succeeded by a performance which I took to be a washing after meat. The long-beaked head was thrust straight forwards through the water, moved from side to side and withdrawn, and then again shot forwards and drawn back, and this was done repeatedly. By this time the afternoon was wearing on, and the rain was coming down more heavily and, well-fed and well-washed, the

bird wished to be gone on its journey home—perhaps to the far-off Dorsetshire coast, where I have often seen whole families of cormorants ranged upon the rocks. But it was not an altogether easy matter for a very wet and very weighty bird to rise from a yielding surface and take flight; it did not appear that the moisture rolled off its plumage like water off a duck's back. Three or four times it stood upright on the waves—

“ His black and dripping wings
Half open to the wind—”

and flapped and flapped those black and dripping wings, until at last the big, dark feet parted from the water and the great fowl was launched in the air, and sped away westwards with level neck outstretched.

VIII

Piles of freshly-dug chalk should never be passed by without examination. The neighbourhood of Winchester is fairly rich in chalk fossils, and even a rapid search often yields enough to repay one for one's trouble. I am not a geologist, but fossils are so profoundly interesting that it is an ever-fresh delight to look for them and find them. The collecting of birds and insects involves destruction of life, and the unscrupulous collecting of flowers sometimes leads to the extermination of rare species. Neither of these objections can be

urged against fossil-hunting. As long as one acre of chalk down remains unquarried—as long as the world lasts—countless treasures will still lie hidden ready to yield themselves up to the hammer of the geologist. Bivalves, such as *Terebratulæ* and *Rhynchonellidæ*, are very common about here, and *Micrasters*—the Shepherd's crowns of the country folk—abound in several of our chalk-pits. Many other fossils of different kinds are of course frequently met with, and the diligent excavator always has the hope before him of finding something new and rare. That is the great fascination of fossil-grubbing; the geologist sends his pick into the stone and opens up virgin soil upon which no eye has ever rested. The least imaginative of us cannot help being sometimes stirred when a blow splits the solid chalk and we realise that our feeble meddling has shattered down in ruins, and laid bare, the secret things of the earth that have remained hidden and intact for millions of years. Strange beasts, cave-dwellers, Neolithic men, the warriors of the bronze age, woad-stained Britons, Romans, Saxons, Normans, Mediæval knights and Elizabethan courtiers, Roundheads, and Cavaliers, highway-robbers, and shepherds with bleating flocks, have passed and repassed—have lived and wooed and begotten sons and daughters, have fought and sickened and died—and all the time the little, fragile shells that now, at last, our hands are outstretched to grasp, have lain lost in profound stillness and darkness under their feet.

IX

Nothing has pleased me more for a long time than an encounter that I have lately had with a hawker, who was selling toys or ornaments manufactured by herself. Shops stored with rows and rows of machine-made dolls, animals, steam-boats and cars, are dreary places ; there is no charm or interest about gaudy, painted toys turned out by the hundred. The odd little things on the hawker's tray were very different from those dull wares, which possess no individuality and may all be broken to-day, and replaced to-morrow, without their destruction costing a pang to a childish owner's heart. Surely even a modern babe would share, in some degree, the satisfaction with which I look at the shilling's-worth of birds and beasts which is now decorating my chimney-piece ! A rabbit made out of a big snail-shell ; head, ears, toes, and scut formed of putty and spotted with brown paint according to the fancy of the artist who wrought it ; the whole varnished, and glued to a varnished mussel-shell. Then a pair of cats fashioned in the same manner ; a bristle stuck through their noses for whiskers, and their tails curled round their tabby, snail-shell backs. Best of all, a bustling, whelk-bodied, putty-headed, mother hen—a Speckled-Hambro', I think—with three round, putty chickens at her feet and another perched upon her shoulders. A mussel-shell wing stands out on either side, and an upturned pair of closed mussel-shells makes an excellent tail. All these

little creatures are full of character, and no two are exactly alike. It must require considerable neatness and ingenuity to produce such ornaments, and the humour which lurks in every one of their curves does not come there without a consciousness of its presence existing in the creator's mind ; at least, so I judged from the smile of amusement and pride which appeared on the woman's sunburnt face when I praised her handiwork and told her how much pleasure it gave me to see once more specimens of the wayfaring man's humble craft. " Ah," she said, " these things were nothing compared with what her husband could do ; he used to make stags and all sorts of animals, but he was dead now, and she had never been able to learn the more difficult work," So this art, like most other simple, open-air employments and trades, is dying out. I should much like to know how many generations have practised it. Perhaps the cave-men pinched up heads and tails of clay and stuck them on to shells to amuse their ruddy, skin-girt offspring.

NOVEMBER

NOVEMBER

I

When the nights grow cold, the wrens begin their winter custom of sleeping together in companies, and they cannot settle down to rest without much chattering and scolding and slipping in and out of their dormitories. A great many roost in thick masses of ivy and other creepers, and many more in sheds and stable-lofts, while some of the little birds have adopted the habit of sleeping in the nests of house-martins. Two or three years ago I used to watch fourteen of the tiny creatures squeeze themselves night after night into a single martin's nest on the south side of my house ; and when the nest was tightly packed, late comers who tried to creep in among the warm, huddled bodies of their friends, were unceremoniously ejected and forced to seek less comfortable quarters. The number that the one nest accommodated was invariably fourteen—neither more nor less. How the birds managed to exist for fifteen or sixteen hours wedged together in the narrow space, without being suffocated, I do not know ; I suppose they enjoyed the sense of companionship, as

well as the heat generated by the compact mass of feathers and living flesh and blood. All small birds are naturally safer in cold weather, and less liable to suffer from severe frosts, if they sleep "conglobulated together in a heap"—as Dr. Johnson said of his hibernating swallows—than if they perch, isolated, in shrubs or trees. Unfortunately, I have now no martins' nests on my own house, but I have several times seen little wrens running up the walls of other people's houses in the dusk of the autumn evenings, and making their way into the snug nests under the eaves.

II

The winged seeds—"keys or bird's tongues, as they are called," says Evelyn in his *Sylva*—of the sycamores and maples have by this time almost all dropped to the ground; some are so formed that they spin rapidly in their descent when a slight breeze is blowing. In the gardens and shrubberies of Winchester grow many Norway-maples, *Acer plantanoides*, and the bunches of seeds that fall from these ornamental trees are particularly noticeable because they are large—larger than the keys of the common maple and sycamore—and they are often marked with a deep reddish-purple stain. The winged seeds of the Norway maple grow in regular pairs, and each wing is designed after the model, as it were, of a dragon-fly's wing. I have lying before me as I write an accurate, life-size

drawing of a dragon-fly *Libellula depressa*, and below the drawing I have placed a pair of seed-wings. The resemblance between the vegetable wings and the insect wings is extraordinarily close, and, oddly enough, the two pairs are exactly the same size. The front edges of the wings follow precisely similar lines and curves, their veinings and reticulations are almost identical, and the dark blotch at the base of the true wing takes the place of the seed at the end of the maple's "key." Wings, whether attached to an insect's body or to a ripe seed, are made for flight, and perhaps it is not after all very remarkable that a pattern of wing which serves to bear up a dragon-fly when put in motion by the creature's living will, serves also to carry far afield the seed that yields itself to the blind force of the wind.

III

Acorn-gleaning is an operation which one watches with special pleasure. A thousand years ago, polished acorns rattled down through the leaves as they do to-day, and swineherds collected them to swell the winter store. A group of country people engaged in this homely harvest cannot differ much in appearance from the picture which their remote ancestors must have presented when they, too, were busied with the same task. The colour of the gleaner's clothes is softened by toil and weather to a pleasant neutral tint ; here a warm earth-brown, and there a brown akin to green. Perhaps

a little child dressed in faded flax-blue toddles about playing with empty acorn-cups, and an old white-bearded man bends under the weight of his heavy load. Sitting on a bank with tufts of feverfew and ruddy sorrel-leaves at one's feet—the scent of burning weeds in one's nostrils and the contented chuckle of homeward-flapping rooks sounding overhead—and looking at the acorn-gatherers stooping under the oak-trees one can forget modern towns and modern ways and modern raiment, and all the rest of the machinery which has been carefully elaborated for the purpose of making life hideous, and can think one's self back into the days when human beings struck no more discordant note in the landscape than the—

“ Four-footed beasts on the red-crown'd clover
The pied and horned beasts on the plain ”

days when flocks of bustards sped like ostriches over the downs, when bitterns boomed in the marshes, kites and ravens brooded over the folds in lambing-season, Will-o'-the wisps swung their lanterns in the meadows, and fairies danced at midnight on the turf.

IV

No dead thing is more dead, and more pathetic in death, than old, disused machinery. The other day I visited a deserted windmill that stands by itself on a

bleak hill-top where its sails once caught every wind of heaven and swung busily round, creaking and groaning and setting all the wheels within in motion. Now the doors are gone from their hinges, the windows are blind pits of darkness, and the great timber posts and rafters, the iron cogs and pins, the wooden shafts and the round axles, have all slipped from their places and rest aslant, some on the ground, and some high overhead supported by the massive beams and remnants of broken stairway. The bright autumnal sunshine outside, and the singing of the larks, made the gloom and ruin seem the more forlorn when I went into the dead and abandoned mill. The cobwebbed wheels looked as though they knew that they had once been alive and would never live again, and one felt that the spirit of the past was an actual presence only waiting for a fitting moment to reveal itself to sympathetic human eyes. Perhaps such a moment comes, not in the sunlight but in the moonlight, when the bats and owls wake up, and make glad the heart of the empty building with the sound of their living voices and their active flittings to and fro.

But even in the warm noontide the windmill was not without certain little inhabitants who were wide awake and by no means silent ; I have never seen so many drone-flies anywhere as I found inside its walls. I should think that all the drone-flies of the neighbourhood must have laid themselves up for the winter in the crevices of the bricks and timber, and must have been awakened by the genial heat of the cloudless autumn day. They hovered and drifted to and fro in the air,

monotonously humming, and crawled on the walls, and spread out their wings, and moved their bee-like bodies slowly up and down. The spiders who lurk in the shadowed corners, need strong webs if they hope to catch victims so stout and lusty as these burly flies.

Within were drone-flies, and without were blue-bottles. The sun-warmed wall on the south side of the mill was dotted over with great blue flies who were basking in the midday rays ; possibly they also had been drawn from their winter quarters by the charm of the brief Indian Summer. Heat appears to be of more importance to these creatures than nutriment ; they wake up daily and take the air as long as they can find one patch of bright October sunshine to bask in, though they may be far away from any store of food—such as the honeyed ivy-blossom which in late autumn supplies a host of insects of various sorts, with a meal.

The windmills which were once a conspicuous feature in many English landscapes, are gradually disappearing from our southern hills. They were among those few works of man which ornamented and did not deface the land on which they stood. Steam and petrol can do the tasks which the wind did of old, and can do them more quickly, and once again utility has ousted beauty. Probably the men who designed and built the old mills, had little or no thought of beauty when they planned their work ; but they shaped and adapted honest and well-wrought materials as perfectly as possible for the fulfilment of the ends they had in view, and—as not infrequently happens with honest work—beauty,

unsought, sprang into being by the way. There is scant measure of poetry or romance about the thumping of an engine and the smell of grease and oil, but there was glamour in the outstretched arms of the windmill and the stir and hum of their motion, in the mill-house with its wooden steps, and in all the healthy activity and life of the hill-top industry. Windmills were useful landmarks, dominating the whole country-side; their place is ill supplied by new, scarlet-roofed villas and country houses set aloft on open downs and wooded heights which a few years ago were the homes of stone-curlews and brown hooting owls.

V

Whatever else autumn may or may not be, it is the season which above all others makes one long for the hands and the brush of an artist. The infinitely varied beauties of spring—emerald-budded trees and hedges, primrose and bluebell woods, and clear-cut landscapes—seem such impossible subjects that they do not stir in one the same desire for expression on canvas or paper; but there is something about the vague mists and softened outlines and broad colour effects of autumn that almost cheats one into believing that it would not after all be so very difficult to put them into a picture—a little practice and technical skill, and it could be done. A fond delusion!

The other day I saw a perfect Millet subject; to the

eye of ignorance it seemed that that artist might well have painted the actual scene, without addition or subtraction, as a pendant to his *Angelus* or *Gleaners*. On a brown ploughed field, sloping up towards the west all the couch-grass had been gathered into little heaps ; the surface of the earth showed that peculiar richness of texture and colour which belongs to freshly-ploughed ground, and the piles of dead grass-roots stood out a colder, paler brown against the warm roughness of the soil. To the left, the field was bare, and its soft curves and upward sweep were uninterrupted by any ridge or mound of the gathered twitch. A solitary figure, a man in working-clothes of indistinguishable hue, was moving among the dry heaps. First a single column of smoke rose from the most distant of the heaps, and was blown across the fallow land that lay beyond ; and then the worker lifted a bundle of the lighted stuff upon his fork and carried it, blazing, to the next pile, and laid it on the windward side. He raised the topmost layers of the couch-grass, and shook them to let in the air, drew some of the dead weed round the spark of fire, and coaxed it till it crackled in the heat and sent up a tongue of flame. From mound to mound the man went, always advancing against the wind, with his head and shoulders thrown back and his scorching burden held out far in front of him ; the smoke blew into his eyes, and fragments of burning stem and root dropped from his fork and floated to the ground. Behind him he left an irregular array of fires, spread over the field like tents in a camp, and out of each fire a spire of smoke mounted

and drifted slowly westward, until the whole landscape was obscured by a brooding pearl-grey cloud. By the time the last heap was crackling and blazing—the loose fibres of root and stalk writhing in the torture of the flame—the first heap had sunk into a patch of white and black ash with threads of living sparks running through it and a quiver of heat hovering above the centre where the core of the fire had been. The air was filled with the scent of the burning—the familiar, all-pervading fragrance which is part of the very spirit of the autumn.

VI

Hampshire folk habitually speak of “making a couch” when they purpose burning up an accumulation of dead leaves or any kind of garden rubbish. The word “couch,” used in this sense, is, of course, properly speaking, a fire made up of couch-grass and of nothing else; but by reason of the fact that couch-grass is always burnt, and that the smouldering heap in which it is consumed is, briefly, called a couch, “couch” has come to mean in common parlance a bonfire composed of any sort of refuse vegetable matter. The original form of the English name of *Agropyrum repens*—that ubiquitous, ineradicable weed detested alike by gardeners and by agriculturists—is supposed to have been *Quitch*-grass, of which word *couch* and *twitch* are both corruptions. “Quitch” is derived from the Anglo-Saxon *cwice*,

vivacious, and the plant has been given its popular title "on account," says Prior, "of the tenacity of life." The name is well bestowed, for long years of digging, hoeing, raking, and burning, have failed to exterminate—or even to keep in check—this creeping grass, which is endowed with an over-abundant vitality.

An instance of the manner in which an object may by a roundabout process acquire a name to which it has no right—may be descriptively labelled with a word which has been divorced from its original meaning—is well known to us all. By uneducated people, and even by people who ought to know better, a horse-chestnut tree is now commonly called a "conker-tree"—actually so spelt. Schoolboys long ago played—and they still play—a game called "conquerors," in which the combatants are horse-chestnuts secured to the ends of knotted strings. The first player holds a chestnut suspended by its string from his finger and thumb, and the second whirls his warrior round in the air and with it strikes sharply at the hanging nut; the two players continue to strike alternately each at the other's chestnut, until one of the combatants is split and destroyed, and its rival becomes a "conqueror." When the game is carried on properly and systematically each owner of a "conqueror" keeps a record of his champion's victories; a successful, death-dealing stroke does not merely add a poor "one" to the score—it entitles the victor to annex all its adversary's previous successes and to count them as its own. In this way a carefully preserved veteran chestnut may easily pose as the hero of far more

than a hundred fights. It is natural that in the haste of colloquial speech one syllable should have been elided, and the victorious conqueror have become a "conquer"; and, as a matter of course, if one chestnut is a conquer, all are soon conquerors, and what is more reasonable than the naming of the tree on which they grow a "conquer-tree"? After this point has been reached, and the original meaning of the word lost, the disappearance of the original spelling is merely a matter of time.

VII

I have often lamented that it had never fallen to my lot to mark a flock of wild geese passing over the town; but now I can say that I have at last seen such a flock, and have seen it under exceptionally favourable conditions. The day, the hour, the weather, all contributed to make the vision as perfect as possible. A day with the moon but three days past the full; the hour, between ten and eleven at night; still weather, and a clear frosty sky broken only by a few light clouds that scarcely seemed to move across it. I was coming homewards along a road on the outskirts of the town when I heard, at a little distance in front of me, a noise that I took to be the cry of a boy—of a boy uttering inarticulate, wordless notes, now high, now low, such as errand-boys use in hailing one another. I wondered at the muscial quality of the call, and thought it odd that any idler should be making such sounds at such an hour;

but I supposed that some lad was sending out his voice with vigour just for the pure delight of letting it go into the still night air. However, the cries as they drew nearer seemed to grow less human and more ringing ; and soon I was aware that they proceeded from high overhead, and were not the utterances of any terrestrial creature. Looking up, I saw moving straight towards me and silhouetted against the yellow moon and the fleecy clouds that lay low in the eastern sky, a trailing V of great birds with outstretched necks and wide, flapping wings. On they came, continually calling and answering each other in varying tones, and when they passed immediately above me I could hear the soft stir and whisper of their flight. One moment the birds were dim grey forms with the light shining full upon them, and the next, the darkness had swallowed them up. I tried to count the travellers in one long arm of the V, but by the time I had reckoned seventeen, the whole company had disappeared. If we allow only twenty birds to each converging line, and suppose that the stragglers who forged along at the end (between the two farthest points of the V) did not number more than five or six, this gives us a flock made up of not much under fifty individuals.

VIII

It is a day such as exiled Englishmen dwelling in the parched lands of Western Australia, in the arid plains of India, or in dust-dry Mexican cities where never a

shower of rain falls month after month during the season of scorching heat, must long for with an almost intolerable longing when they let their thoughts travel homewards. The air is filled with fresh, cool moisture, drops of rain hang from every thorn on the brown quick-set hedges, the puddles in the road reflect the grey sky and are rippled by the wind, dancing yellow leaves fly across from ditch to ditch, and a veil of silvery mist softens the outlines of wood and hill and lone farm-building. On the sagging roof of an old barn the thick growth of emerald moss is sodden and heavy as a sponge; the rotting thatch sinks between each rafter that supports it, and shows the skeleton within—just as the skin of some lean, gaunt beast falls into hollows between its staring ribs. The red and white cows in the pastures are munching wet cabbages; they lift their heads from the soaking ground to chew and gaze, and gaze and chew, and water trickles from the close, damp waves of hair on their broad foreheads. The elm-trees are bare at last, and their naked branches, glazed with rain, rock and sway in the gale that is blowing from the south-west. The only bright colours to be seen in the whole country-side are the scarlet of the rose-hips and the vivid green of a field where plovers are feeding—so vivid is the green, that the plumage of the birds appears, by contrast, to be “brown-empurpled.” In the universal greyness and indistinctness of the land—a world viewed through a haze of falling drops—a blackbird close at hand looks hard and black as a figure cut out of ebony or coal.

But the way leads up to heights where no tall trees grow, and no friendly, half-domesticated birds can endure the tempestuous blasts. It seems at first as though nothing alive were abroad in this wild weather, on the higher reaches of the hills. A shepherd is driving his flock round a shoulder of the great down, to seek such shelter as he can find between two of the giant buttresses whose turfy sides rise with a steepness that is almost precipitous ; the sheep, their fleeces tawny with moisture, break into a trot as they disappear. The last scrubby briars and brambles are left behind, and only a few dwarfed junipers dot the slopes where the close-cropped grass is matted with thyme and moss. At the moment when the topmost point is reached—the old British camp, encircled with fosse and mound, on which for generations the warning beacon-flares were lighted—the full fury of the storm bursts. The rain, driven sideways with tremendous force, pelts and rattles like hail-stones, and the wind roars and shrills and screams ; it has swept straight up from the sea to this point, eight hundred feet above the coast-line, without finding any intervening barrier on which to spend its strength, and it bears with it a sweet, invigorating saltness. Suddenly, hundreds of starlings—their wings soundless in the deafening noise of the gale—hurl themselves over the ridge, which is here narrow, and dropping swiftly down to leeward, vanish. And now the aboriginal inhabitants of the hill, the timid beasts who have their dwelling places among the grooves and furrows in which the herbage is long and rough, appear ; they cannot hear

any footfall, and are not startled into flight until the intruder is close upon them. Hares spring up to right, to left, and on ahead ; a scattered band, two, three, or four visible at a time, they speed away like ships with sails set running before the wind, and are lost behind the eastern curve of the down where the ground falls abruptly. The flattened patch of grass on which one of them has been squatting, feels warm to the hand, and there is something sad about the abandoned form, scarcely sheltered by a few coarse bents ; it is pathetic that even in a spot so remote, in weather so inclement, the little wild animal—wild, from instinctive fear and dread—should be scared from the only home he claims, and that a home so poor and humble.

The heaviest of the rain has passed over, and is blotting out the hills and vales of Berkshire, on which, a few minutes ago, the sun was shining behind a transparent curtain of mist. The drifts of cloud that fly northwards are dark and impenetrable, and their ragged edges dip to meet the outlines of the nearer woods and rising slopes, and hide all that lies beyond. This lofty spur of the great North Downs, higher than any of its neighbours, carries its head in the clouds, and above the clouds ; puffs of white cloud—so smoke-like that it is hard to believe that they are not in truth formed of smoke—come flying over the uneven folds and ridges of the uplands, travelling below the level of the eye, and sink away to the left. The cold, clean rain that still drenches the indigo-dark juniper-bushes, the brown and leafless stalks of thistles, and every object on the open

wold, does not seem to be falling from the sky—it drives horizontally, it clings and saturates, but it does not come down from above. Gradually the heavens are lightened, the south-west distance takes on pearl-white tints, and, away in the valley, field after field springs into clearer view—showing that somewhere there are rifts in the clouds though there is no break in the grey pall overhead.

The time has come to leave the hills, which are now devoid of any sign of life; starlings and hares have found shelter somewhere out of sight, and not even a solitary pipit gets up from a furrow or lifts a querulous, complaining voice. Down, and ever down, past the Seven Barrows where the dead men sleep—the men who with hard toil threw up earthworks and spent their lives in vain defence of their homes—it is a drop of well-nigh four hundred feet to the empty road which lies like a band of colourless ribbon across the broad acres of tilled land. To pass from the high downs, on which all sound and motion were of wind and rain alone, to this quiet road with its hedges full of twittering, flitting birds, is to experience an extraordinarily swift and complete change of surroundings. Bright-breasted robins sit in the skewer-wood bushes, which have shed all their leaves but still bear clusters of rose-pink berries, and chaffinches and greenfinches hasten from tree to tree and call briskly, as though well content with the moisture-laden southerly gales that bring no touch of frost—the foe that they have most reason to fear. Three or four bullfinches fly along the hedge, continually

alighting, and continually being driven on again by the approach of footsteps; the patches of snow-white feathers above their tails flash out conspicuously when their wings are spread, but the rest of their plumage blends with the varied hues of thorn and shrub and creeper, and fails to arrest the eye if for a moment the birds are motionless. A blue-tit perches on a lichened twig and twitch-twitches at the hoary stuff in search of insects; his smooth blue head and green-grey back are unruffled by the rain, and not till hunger and cold drive him into some town or village, will he exchange his birthright of free independence for a feast of cocoa-nut in a back-garden.

DECEMBER

DECEMBER

I

IT has been said that a cloud of starlings gathering from all directions to their roosting-place is "one of the finest sights that bird-life presents in England." A week or two ago I had the privilege of being present at the *Grand Coucher* of an immense number of these birds. Three or four large English poplars, bare of leaves, stood up against a pale evening sky. Every branch was loaded with a multitude of dusky starlings—a heavy crop of living fruit. Now and then a detachment rose in the air and circled round, and now and then a battalion of late-comers arrived from the fields and meadows and joined the main army. The sight was certainly a fine one, but I thought that the musical part of the pageant was a more wonderful thing even than the spectacular display. Not one among the vast assembly was silent, and the storm of sound continually increased in volume. I shut my eyes while I listened to the clamour and tried to determine to what other noise it might fitly be likened. At first I thought of the rush of a swift stream over a rocky bed ; then of

the rattle of a colossal thunder-shower dashing down on a forest of leaves and a pool of lapping water ; and then the torrent of voices recalled the drag of shingle drawn back by the retreat of tumbling waves. The last comparison was the best. There is a liquid quality in the starlings' concert of wind instruments, which inevitably suggests sea or river, or lake ; the clatter, chatter and gurgle of wet pebbles and bubbling water is really not unlike this tumultuous bird music.

II

The spirit of the New Forest binds with strong cords the soul of the nature-lover who once yields himself to her charm and for a space lies down to rest each night within the circle of her influence and rises up each day to walk through the green paths which are the aisles of her sanctuary. He may return to dusty pavements and enclosing city walls, or wander far afield, but from time to time he will feel a tugging at the cords that hold him in thrall, and will be drawn back to the silence and the solitude of the deep forest ways—to find in the heart of that silence and that solitude, unalterable peace and satisfaction.

Six months ago the Great Copse slumbered in burning heat ; on Midsummer Eve all its broad rides were parched and brown, its ditches without moisture, and the tall bracken faint and sapless, and even in the bed of the Dark Water banks of shingle lay uncovered and

only a thin, clear stream trickled slowly along under the drooping ferns, or gathered into shallow pools where herons fished. To-day, on the Feast of St. Thomas—the shortest day in the year—the forest greets the returning wayfarer with so changed a face that it is not easy to believe that wood, water, earth, and air ever basked in the high noon of a torrid summer. The drip, drip of ceaseless rain sounds among the trees instead of the perpetual rattle of dry holly-leaves falling from their parent stems, every runnel holds a flood which gurgles and swishes and hurries to join the main river that flows through the middle of the Copse, and the “Black Brook” itself has become a rushing torrent, brim-full to the topmost edges of its steep banks and bearing on its surface swirls of tawny foam, while the pure wine-yellow of the summer stream is stained a turbid brown by rotting logs, red soil, and dark sodden leaves. Miniature waves beat against the weathered timbers of the culverts, and twigs and pine-needles caught in little eddies spin round and round before they toss themselves free and speed seawards. The nests of the giant-ants—reared with persistent labour under the scorching suns of June—lie soaked and desolate, and here and there one of these great piles of litter blocks the fair-way of some flooded dyke and splits the swollen current into a chain of tiny waterfalls and rapids. Bare oaks, their rain-washed trunks and branches silver-grey with lichen, rise everywhere from a carpet of dripping, russet-red bracken, and sheets of wet emerald moss cushion the ground close to the margins of the storm-

filled ditches. All the winter colours of the wood are intensified by the abounding moisture—the dead fern is made more ruddy and the spongy moss more verdant, and the heads of the tall fir-trees take on a deeper shade of sea-green.

There is at no time any lack of colour in the December woods. Little golden trefoils—the autumn-dyed leaves of wild-strawberries—rest on beds of moss and hoary cup-lichen, the brambles are still purple and the briars still jewelled with scarlet hips, and tufts of sulphur-yellow toadstools spring from the damp mould and push up between layers of brown-oak-drift, empty acorn-cups, and wind-strewn sticks and branches. High overhead the upper parts of the fir-tree trunks, and their largest limbs, show a warm, deep pink which changes to mahogany when the rain drifts against the smooth bark that has lost its rough outer cover.

The intense stillness of the Copse in mid-winter is broken only by the sound of running water and of falling drops, by the scream of a solitary jay, the clatter of wood-pigeons' wings or the querulous notes of wandering tits—and by the ceaseless sigh of the wind in the pines. Far, far away the jangle of distant cow-bells is faintly heard, and the bells' soft tinkle alone betrays that man has any part in the life of this quiet green world, cut off by moor and flood from town and highway and from the chafferings of the village street.

III

Thrifty foresters make jelly from the wild crabs that grow in the woods and from the blackberries which, in their season, load every hedge ; but they do not always pluck the last of the crop from their own apple-trees. Little withered apples, not worth the picking, cling to the bare branches long after all the leaves have been swept away by the sou'westers that blow up from the Channel. Old unpruned trees may be seen with their grey boughs glazed with rain, and carrying on their knotted twigs round yellow fruits which not even the starlings have troubled to harvest. Whole families of sparrows sit on the wet limbs and watch the cottage doors, waiting for the chickens' feeding-time—they know the sound of the hen-wife's finger on the latch as well as the rightful owners of the food. Now and then a brown bird bends forward, and, dipping his head, drinks one of the clear rain-drops which hang from the under side of his perch ; he finds the water sweet and pure, and tastes another drop and yet another, until something startles him, and flying off suddenly he jerks the branch and sends all the row of diamond beads scattering to the ground.

The low-ceiled cottage parlour is warm and fragrant. A wood fire burns half-way up the chimney, built upon one great log that reaches from side to side of the hearth. This glowing log is part of a gnarled apple-tree which grew in the middle of the garden-plot, and put out a

few green leaves and opened a few pale flowers last May ; six months ago more than one pair of starlings reared their young in the hollow trunk, and chattered and whistled on the crooked, sapless boughs. But an autumn gale tore across the heath and bent the scrubby thorns sideways, and lashed the yielding birches, and hurled itself against the dying tree and threw it to the ground. Now the moisture in the damp wood sings and splutters, and flames leap up and ignite the soot on the fire-back, and trails of red and gold sparks chase each other in serpentine tracks over the soft blackness, and are extinguished one by one. Do children of the present day watch these bright hurrying sparks behind the fire, and call them "the people coming out of Church," and exclaim, when all but two have finally disappeared, that the loiterers are "the Parson and the Clerk ? "

IV

A few days before Christmas I went to see some foresters in their cottage among the woods, and soon found that I was visiting a house of mourning. Their fat pig had died a natural death scarcely a week before the date at which it was to have been killed. One sty was still inhabited by a grunting sow, but the shed next to it was empty, desolate, and clean, and the run in front had been freshly littered with dry brown oak-leaves. The loss of the pig formed the principal subject of a

talk that lasted, off and on, for hours ; every conversational avenue was either blocked by the dead beast—whose ghost shut out all other objects from the mental view—or else led straight back to the point from which one had tried to get away. This is the gist—pieced together—of what was said :

“ There—nobody knows what it means to anyone situated as we are. We’d been reckoning all along on having her indoors for Christmas, and the man was to have come the very next Friday. It would have been meat in the house for the better part of six months, and she weighing eight score, dead weight, and worth five pounds to us, with everything the price it is now. She didn’t seem quite, not to call *right* one evening, and next morning she was lying down in the corner ; so I went to mix her up a drench, and before we could get back she was dead. Of course we had to let the policeman know—with all this talk of swine-fever—and he came over and we opened her ; he said it was all right, not a sign of anything, and as beautiful flesh as you could wish to see. I’ll tell you how it was, if you can understand ; the liver ought to be in three parts, and it was all in one, and you couldn’t make a mark on it, not if you hit it with a stick—it was as hard as that. So then we knew just what had happened ; the blood couldn’t get through the liver, and it had overflowed into the heart and killed her. It seemed only right that someone should see the pig before she was buried, so I said I would go and ask the old lady down by the ford to step up, she would be better than no one. She’d got her pig—own brother to

ours, and that we'd sold her ourselves—indoors on the Monday, a perfect picture to look at, and lard enough to last her till goodness knows when ; and I'd only said on the Saturday, when I went up to shop to fetch a quarter-pound of lard for a pie, ' this'll be the last lard I'll have to buy this side of Midsummer,' and now there's not an ounce in the house. Well, the old lady hadn't hardly gone, when forest-keeper came along ; it seemed so fortunate, as if it was all for a purpose ; it was just what I'd wanted that someone like that should see the pig. So he had a good look at her, and he said that if we had killed her a fortnight before, we might have eaten her and been none the worse for it ; the meat was as right as anything, and all she had ailed was that some time or other she had taken a bit of a chill and her liver had grown together. Couldn't we anyhow have told she was sickening, d'you say ? No, there wasn't nothing to take notice of. She never had been a hearty eater, not like the other pig we've got in the sty ; she was always a bit of a mimper over her food. I didn't tell you, did I, that we thought we should have lost the other one too ? After the old pig took and died, she went right off her food and didn't seem to care to touch nothing, and there wasn't a bit of curl to her tail for three days ; I suppose she sort of missed the sound of the pig moving next door—you see they was from the same litter, and she'd always been used to company. I said we'd better take and kill her at once, as it was plain we weren't going to have any luck this year ; but of course we couldn't really do such a thing, because

she's like to have little ones in March, and now she's as right as rain.

“ We had quite a business burying the pig, and the hole was big enough to put a child in. It seemed a downright sin to make away with all those pounds and pounds of meat, and when I saw the two hams go underground—there, I can't tell you what I felt ! To think how I'd worked all those months, just to have the pig indoors for Christmas, and then for her to go off like that ! It's enough, come to think of it, to make one lose heart and give up altogether. And what we had spent in barley-meal, since we'd been fattening her, was something cruel. And one time o' day she'd seemed such a likely pig too. When they was all little, before they was a week old, forest-keeper came past one morning just as two or three of them was rubbing their backs, as old-fashioned as you please, against the post of the sty ; and he stopped and looked at them, and he said, ‘ Those pigs of yours are going to do well, it's a sure sign a pig's thrifty when it rubs its back that way almost as soon as it's born.’ And I'm sure it wasn't for want of anything I could do, that she was taken and died. See the trouble I was at with them, and the green jelly I made for them. There's nothing like green jelly from the fern for young pigs. You pick the tops of the fern while they're curled-over, like, and all soft and tender, and you boil them till they come to nothing, then you put the stuff by and it sets into a jelly, and you can keep it any time—it doesn't matter if it looks sort of turned-off ; pigs will thrive on that if they'll thrive on anything.

But it wouldn't do to let forest-keeper catch you picking the fern, it's not allowed. I don't believe there's a thing goes on in that Copse, though, but what forest-keeper gets to know it. You'd hardly credit it, but he came along one day and called out to ask who'd been picking the King-fern (*Osmunda regalis*), and I was obliged to own up that I'd picked a bit; and there he'd got a piece of it held behind him that he'd found alongside one of the rides, and he said how I ought to have known better, seeing there were strict orders from Lyndhurst that no one was to touch the King-fern. But of course it's only the common fern, what they sell for litter when it's dry—and it fetches money too and something into keeper's pocket—that I take for the pigs.

“It do seem hard that we should lose one of our pigs, so careful as we are over them. You never see our sows running wild all over the forest, as some people's do, and breaking through the fences and getting into gardens, and eating up all the green stuff when anyone's back is turned; not but what they *do* say, as there's some that'll take the sticks out of their own fences, to let the cows and that in, so as to make a complaint and get money back for the damage done—we all know that there *are* people what'll do anything and everything and trust to luck not to get found out. But we don't let ours out, not even when we've the right to, while the acorns are down, for we don't want them to get kernels in their fat through eating too many, and that's what's bound to happen if you're not careful.

“They came up from the Old Quay last Sunday, his

people did, to see how we were getting on ; for it's no use denying we had been too agitated over the pig to go near them, though we'd sent to tell them, as was only right. They felt they must look in, for they knew how upset we'd be. And I had upset myself terribly, and made myself fair sick, worrying, though I knew it was silly to give way with all the work to be done and no more than one pair of hands to do it. When he saw me too full to speak, after we'd buried the old pig, he said to me—' Whatever's the good of carrying on like that ? What is to be, must be, and we're not the only ones to lose a pig.' It's all very well to talk that way, I thought, of course we're not the first to lose a pig, but everything seems to come at once—the cow having a bull calf, and the foal going lame with something in its foot that it picked up on the forest, and now the pig dying. But there's this to be said, there's two ways of taking things—and if she hadn't died we shouldn't have got to know who our friends are, and it's proved plain enough that we've some very good friends, and that where we should never have thought of looking for them. It does seem to make you more comfortable, when you've got to live neighbours with people, to feel that they'll act neighbourly if you're in trouble."

V

One afternoon when the earth was fast bound in the grip of an iron frost, I went out with my field-glasses and

a bag of bread and seed, to try and feed some of my hungry friends. All along the roads, chaffinches, robins, and other birds were diligently pecking over every heap of horse droppings, and hunting in the banks and ditches for morsels of food. Whenever I passed any of these poor starvelings I threw down a handful of crumbs. Thrushes, blackbirds, and finches fluttered away, and did not reappear while I was in sight; but time after time, before I had gone many yards, down dropped a watchful robin and began to feed. In a remote country lane, I leaned my bicycle against a post, and, scattering some bread on a piece of open grass, I went up to a hedge to look through my glasses at a party of fieldfares. Almost at once a robin arrived and picked up some of the fragments I had dropped. Soon he spied my bicycle and leaving the food he flew on to the front wheel, and from thence to the edge of the basket, and then vanished into the basket, where, no doubt, he ate more crumbs. But now another robin alighted on the mudguard and hopped on to the saddle. This intrusion the first bird could not brook; the cycle had become his own, his hunting-ground, and he flew out and chased the newcomer away and pursued him down the road.

The attitude which the robin adopts towards mankind, and mankind's belongings, marks him as a bird apart. Leave a chair for a few minutes in any robin-haunted garden, and the chances are that our familiar friend will almost immediately perch upon the back. Stick your spade into the ground, and "the careful robin," which never fails to "eye the delver's

toil," will settle on the handle. While all other birds—unless they have as individuals been more or less tamed by regular feeding—will avoid anything which is constantly handled by human beings, robins seem invariably to be attracted not only by ourselves, but also by our properties.

"The honest robin," said Izaak Walton, "loves mankind both alive and dead." The tradition that robins cover with leaves any human body they may find is so old and so often alluded to by various writers, that it is difficult not to believe that it must have been based upon some actual facts which occurred and were observed in times past. Shakespeare makes Arviragus say:—

"I'll sweeten thy sad grave : thou shalt not lack
The flower that's like thy face, pale primrose ; nor
The azured hare-bell like thy veins : . . .
. . . The ruddock would
With charitable bill . . . bring thee all this ;
Yea, and furr'd moss besides, when flowers are none,
To winter-ground thy corse."

It is easy to imagine that long ago, when England was full of forest and marsh-land, and much more sparsely populated than it is at the present time, solitary travellers and hunters must often have perished in remote spots, through exposure, treachery, or misadventure, and their bodies have lain for many days unburied on the ground. Perhaps, when such a

body was at last discovered, inquisitive robins may have been seen hopping about the silent figure, attracted by the human form, and perplexed by the stillness and mystery of death ; and, if the breeze had scattered dry leaves and twigs upon the lonely sleeper, our forefathers—whose primitive minds were better fitted to conceive, and straightway have faith in, pretty fables than are our hard, prosaic modern ones—may well have thought that the “tame ruddock’s” love for his human friends did not cease with their mortal breath, but that if any other sepulchre was denied to them,

“The robin redbreast piously did
Cover them with leaves.”

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